

Kim Sunee's 'A Mouthful of Stars'

By **T. Susan Chang** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 22, 2014

PRINT REPRINTS

ARTICLE



ASH ADAMS

Kim Sunee's "A Mouthful of Stars" is part memoir, part cookbook.

In another century, former *Southern Living* food editor Kim Sunee might have been called an “adventuress” — globe-trotting, free-wheeling, even scandalous. Born in Korea, but adopted into a New Orleans family, Sunee has wandered far and wide. Her first book chronicled her affair with cosmetics billionaire Olivier Baussan and their life at table in Provence. “A Mouthful of Stars” continues in the same memoir/cookbook format, chronicling journeys on four continents and dishes picked up along the way.

The book is a delicious package, invitingly designed and photographed. Sunee's stories are laid out with jewel-box care, tempting you to follow along in her eclectic journey. Recipes are a hodgepodge, organized geographically

rather than by course or season. It's a high-risk formula for a publisher, banking on readers falling in love with the writer's voice and recipes. When the recipes are good, they're soaringly so.

Roast pork tacos are more of a braise, simmered to pull-apart tenderness in beer, fresh pineapple, and fresh orange. Finished with a tomatillo-poblano salsa, they feed a crowd to happy indolence. Like most simply seared salmon fillets, Sunee's shine with the right accompaniment: a citrusy, peppery gremolata of herbs, with lush pistachios providing a smooth counterpoint.

Frittatas and Spanish tortilla can be messy, collapsing affairs, but the Vietnamese-style version here is stabilized with — surprise! — bean thread noodles. The result is a firm, savory golden disk, flecked with crab and pork and scattered with fresh green herbs and vegetables.

Mashed potatoes mixed into ground pork give mini meatballs a fine, yielding texture; pine nuts and currants add Moorish grace notes. Pork belly slices slathered in the Korean condiments gochujang and gochugaru are sweet and fiery. You have to mind the grill rack constantly, since all that luscious golden fat ignites in seconds, but it's worth it. And a Key lime pie is the easy kind, with a crumbled graham cracker crust, but fresh lime zest and creme fraiche make it taste like something more rarefied.

Some ideas turn out better in my imagination than on the plate. A curry leaf cocktail is almost vanishingly subtle; you can taste the curry leaf-infused syrup only on the exhale. An eggless buttermilk-cherry-balsamic ice cream is simple work as ice creams go. It's a little granular, but the balsamic helps lend its summery flavor an undertone of mystery.

Radish and pink lady apples make a crisp, pretty salad, crunchy with fennel and mint. It's not the sort of thing where you crave second servings, though it makes a good foil for heartier fare, like a couscous with seethed and simmered vegetables, along with crumbled merguez sausage, if you can get it, otherwise chorizo.

Some recipes simply fall flat. A salad that's little more than grated carrots with orange flower water and oranges seems like a great idea, but the orange flower water is cloying after several bites. Crispy Brussels sprouts would be better quartered rather than halved, and not worth the overnight wait. Generous scatterings of lemon and parsley make it feel enough like fried calamari that you end up disappointed that it's not.

A fry-up of hot and sweet peppers offers the heady promise of aromatic coconut and tamarind, flavors I love. Yet the finished product involves limp peppers swimming in a sludgy spice paste without a trace of the bright, sour dry heat I had hoped for.

Sunee's writing has many fans, and her stories are compelling. Yet although I'd been ready enough to embrace the book after the first intoxicating recipe, a few brushes with lackluster style in both the food and the prose cooled my ardor. By the time I reached Sunee's final pages (given over to a heartfelt ode to her fiance), I felt a little embarrassed, as though receiving a confession I'd rather not have heard.

A Mouthful of Stars: A Constellation of Favorite Recipes From My World Travels

Author: Kim Sunee

Publisher: Andrews McMeel Publishing

Publication year: 240 pp.

Number of pages: \$27.99

More

- **Recipe for pan-seared salmon with pistachio-herb gremolata**

There's no doubt Sunee knows food. Her tacos and Korean barbecue are good enough to earn the book a place in my library, if not in my kitchen. If you judge a cookbook solely by its way with pork (as I am sometimes tempted to do), this one swings for the fences.

T. Susan Chang can be reached at admin@tsusanchang.com.