

COOKBOOK REVIEW

‘Bitter’: Exploring the flavor we most shun

By **T. Susan Chang** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 06, 2015

The Australian chef Jennifer McLagan (who now splits her time between Toronto and Paris), has made herself into a spokesperson for the edgiest foods with her previous books: “Bones,” “Fat,” and “Odd Bits.” They may be the best-regarded yet least-used trio of books ever published; indeed, “Fat” won the coveted James Beard Cookbook of the Year Award in 2009.

Her newest volume, “Bitter,” continues the trend with a thorough exploration of the flavor we most shun, with ingredients ranging from the familiar to the challenging. In several recipes, McLagan turns to the naturally stored sugars of roots and gourds to offset bitter flavors.



Jennifer McLagan is a James Beard Cookbook of the Year winner.

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Radicchio and pumpkin risotto is more vegetable than rice (I made it with butternut squash, because that’s what I had on hand); the radicchio balancing the chunky sweetness of the squash, though it took a good quantity of butter and Parmesan to hold

it all together. In the same way, roasted and caramelized root vegetables get a bracing lift from roasted chicory, while rosemary lifts the whole dish with its distinctive perfume.

A rutabaga puree is no showstopper on its own, but caramelized shallots strewn on top of the mash turn it into a special accompaniment for meaty entrees. Acerbic dandelion greens and grated cooked potatoes go into a traditional Swiss “rosti,” a kind of potato pancake. Though the potatoes do an admirable job of taming that twisted, gnarly dandelion flavor, I found it a pretty heavy construction overall, especially when cooked in duck fat.

McLagan has a confident, sometimes overpowering, hand with bitter greens. Belgian endive salad with anchovy dressing makes a strong statement and is not for the fainthearted, as the tender half-rings are bathed in a powerful fishy funk. Bitter greens ravioli are fast to make with wonton skins. But as with many wonton-skin creations, they get floppy and flimsy in the boil, and many fall apart. But their blend of ricotta and escarole is a gentle sort of bitter and sinks into a pool of butter with real grace.

Bitter: A Taste of the World’s Most Dangerous Flavor with Recipes



Author: Jennifer McLagan

Publisher: 10 Speed Press

Number of pages: 272

Book price: \$26.99

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**Recipe for pork chops in coffee
black currant sauce**

If you haven't yet deconstructed a Brussels sprout and flash-sauteed its leaves, McLagan's method gives good results. It seems like a chore, but really it takes only 15 to 20 minutes to de-leaf a pound of Brussels sprouts, which is time you save at the stove, since the leaves cook so quickly. They retain a bit of crunch and little trace of the cabbage-y attitude you associate with sprouts.

There's a reason beer and sausages go together, as in bratwurst cooked in beer. There's something about the way bitter hops complement pork fat both on the crisp exterior and the sweet, meaty interior. Coffee works the same magic on some black currant pork chops, acting as a marvelously effective pan deglazer while contributing a mocha-like undercurrent.

In a rare fit of distraction, I made multiple timing mistakes in a recipe for a lamb stew, yet because it was a lamb stew, it forgave me. This one's secret is a powerful dose of fenugreek seeds, ground, soaked, and so potent you will make a face if you taste a tiny dab on its own. Yet dispersed into the stew, it provides a kind of scaffolding for the rich and gamy lamb; like the harmonic structure that allows a musician to improvise.

Best of all is a walnut cake; I think of a walnut as a stern sort of nut, not lush like a cashew or sweet like a hazelnut. But walnut's austerity transforms when ground and blended with cardamom and orange flavors. A dusting of cocoa reminds you that some bitter things are really earthy in disguise; the cake became an instant favorite in our house.

The very toughest sell? Bitter melon. Neither a red curry-and-coconut milk sauce nor a curious stir-fry with pork and lemon juice does much to contextualize that screamingly bitter taste, which unleashes a cascade of punitive aftertastes in the mouth. (I've loved bitter melon in the past, but always with heavy doses of sweet, salt, and spice.) Still, I end up eating the leftovers.

These are slow recipes. Many call for overnight chills, or hours-long rests. At times I used the odd trick to speed them up. I ran out of lard and duck fat pretty quickly (McLagan adores both), but substituted butter and olive oil with no ill effects.

Overall, it's a book with ambition and sometimes disconcerting scope, and it leaves a bitter taste in the mouth, which you may find you like more than you thought you would.

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