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COOKBOOK REVIEW

Nigel Slater's latest is a book of big ideas



Englishman Nigel Slater's latest offering is chock full of ideas that require few ingredients and are quick to put together.

By T. Susan Chang | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 30, 2014

London-based Nigel Slater, the longtime Observer food columnist, publishes cookbooks prolifically. His recent books (especially “Tender” and “Ripe,” twin odes to vegetables and fruits) have been personal, voluminous, lyrical works that chronicle a very English

love affair with the garden. They're books you can enjoy for their jeweled, sensuous prose alone, and they reveal a tireless and questing appetite.

"Eat," just released in the US, is an entirely different sort of book. In fact, it's not like any cookbook on the market. Squat and solid, with a mango-colored linen binding, it has the heft of a small dictionary. It's overflowing with hundreds of good ideas — more than 450 — expressed in compact form. Few take more than half a page and a handful of ingredients, and most are swift in execution, too. The majority feed just one or two, conveying that emphasis on individual pleasure that is a hallmark of Slater's work.

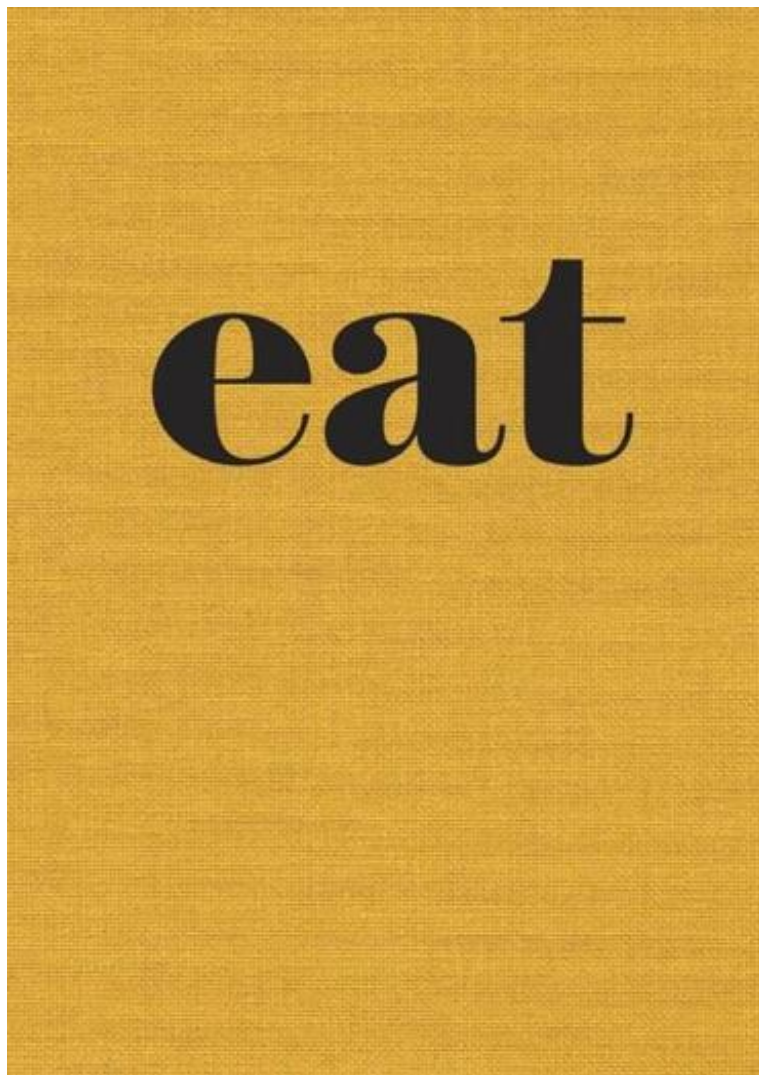
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At their best, these recipes telegraph complex flavors in a few succinct gestures. A chicken burger relies on lemon and tarragon for its lively, fresh flavor. Bacon and bread crumbs, used as a "gremolata," have exactly the effect you would expect on zucchini, countering their pliable texture and neutral flavor with salty, crumbly fireworks.

A Spanish-style tortilla is one way to prepare a potato in less than 10 minutes — it's nothing more than tiny starchy dice bound together with egg and a bit of shallot and butter. Run under a broiler for a crisp crust, it feels like a real indulgence for breakfast. Roast potatoes are tender within from blanching, and firmly crusted. Bedecked with spices and tangled with some greens, they're a side that makes a meal when you can't stop eating it.

Other recipes rely on ingredients that might be time-consuming to make yourself, but are easy and magical when purchased. Garam masala warms up patties of sesame seed and lamb, set off nicely by cool shavings of cucumber and yogurt. Slater turns sausage and puff pastry into a contrarian palmier, its curled ears full of crisp pork.

EAT: The Little Book of Fast Food



Author: Nigel Slater

Publisher: 10 Speed Press

Number of pages: 464 pp.

Book price: \$27.99

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Pillowy, creamy comforts are standbys for Slater, like shredded smoked mackerel bathed in cream (on a bed of blanched green beans) — a dish so quintessentially English you yearn to soak up the sauce with toast “soldiers.” A gratin of kale and almonds

nestles in a blanket of cream and bechamel — which is easier to buy off the shelf in Britain. Oat and lemon cookies are nondescript on their own, but a great excuse to eat lemon curd out of the jar.

Recipes are written in narrative format (ingredients called out in the middle of the paragraph rather than listed) and highly compressed, which can lead to some ambiguity. How thick should the pork belly be sliced? Should a red curry-tamarind sauce for satay drumsticks be so liquidy? (I take a chance and reduce it down, until it drapes winningly over crunchy bean sprouts.) One tiny paragraph in a chicken katsu recipe left me with endless questions: How do you fry a sauce? How do you crisp cooked chicken skin covered with sauce in a dry skillet? (I persevere by adding a little oil here and there where it seems ridiculous not to, and end up with something delectable.)

A few shortcuts just don't pay off: A sticky dark-soy roast chicken goes into a mock “pho,” but stirring ginger, lime, and anise into chicken stock is no substitute for the hours-long beefy depth of real pho stock. Salt and pepper pork sounds promising (it's made with black pepper and Szechuan pepper), but in the eating turns out to be fairly nondescript.

In “Eat,” some recipes can turn out to seem hasty, when quick was what was intended. Still, as an idea book, it's revolutionary. And most of these ensembles have the potential to turn into ravishing dishes — in the hands of a seasoned cook with, perhaps, a little more time for the details.

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