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WORLD PEACE BEGINS IN THE KITCHEN

A Whole Latte Love

Amanda Hesser chronicles recipe for romance.

COOKING FOR MR. LATTE; A FOOD LOVER'S COURTSHIP, with Recipes by Amanda Hesser. W. W. Norton & Company, 2003. \$23.95 hardcover.

Mr. Latte is patient with Hesser though, and with the help of her therapist, in the end she stumbles to the altar. Despite all the irritations of the writing style and characters, I have to say it's a worthwhile read — for the recipes. They are rich, decadent, occasionally complicated, but complex and well-tested. Oxtail stew from a trip to Rome, Salt Crusted Shrimp, Goat Cheese with Shallot-Cassis Marmalade, Haricot Verts with Walnuts and Walnut Oil, Veal Scaloppine with Fluffy Parmesan — the list is drawn from Hesser's favorite restaurants and from her epicurean circle of friends. The Apician Spiced Dates recipe, from a meal at Lupa (where Hesser forgives Tad Friend for drinking those lattes), is simply wonderful. I doubled the dates and almonds in the recipe and still had plenty of sauce, and plenty of flavor.

Here's further proof that sometimes, you can judge a book by its cover. *Cooking for Mr. Latte* is pink and lavender, frilly, and features a drawing of Amanda Hesser prominently on the cover. Hesser is a food columnist for the *New York Times*, Mr. Latte is Tad Friend, also a writer at the *Times*. This story is a diary of their courtship.

This is interesting in a rubbernecking sort of way: Hesser stumbles through intimacy and building a relationship with sly self-centered humor and plenty of New York sophistication. She calls Tad Friend "Mr. Latte" because he commits the grand faux pas of ordering a latte instead of a plain espresso after dinner. She writes this with such obviousness that I felt like an Oregon hick for not quite understanding what the big deal was myself. Apparently drinks with milk are not allowed after 11 pm, in the same way that white is not worn before Memorial Day.

It's not until Chapter 18, after 9/11, that she forgives him and finally calls him Tad. I just wanted to yell at her when after a day of fighting with her new beau, Hesser gets up at night and re-washes all the dishes he'd cleaned after their dinner party. She has a self-confident assurance throughout the book that can come too close to arrogance. Sometimes it has a familiar ring; I have been known to re-wash dishes myself, but that doesn't make it any more attractive.

The voice in the book can be confusing. If this really is a diary, as it claims to be, it's not always a completely honest one, and glosses over things like Hesser's relationships with friends and family. And if it's a story about food and New York, as it seems to be, it includes more intimate and tedious everyday details than I really needed to know.



Apician Spiced Dates

- 1 bottle light-bodied red wine, like Beaujolais
- 8 medjool dates
- 16 whole almonds, lightly toasted
- 1/4 c. honey
- 1 Tbs. whole black peppercorns
- 1 Tbs. cloves
- 1 Tbs. orange zest
- 4 whole allspice berries
- 2 two inch cinnamon sticks
- 1 bay leaf
- 1/4 c. mascarpone cheese, at room temperature
- coarse sea salt

Pour the wine into a saucepan and bring to a simmer. Add the dates and poach them until the skins blister, about 5 min. Lift out the dates and, while they're still warm, take off the skins. Discard the skins. Cut open the dates on one long side, remove pits and place two almonds in the center of each date. Fold closed.

Add honey and spices to the wine and continue simmering until the wine is reduced by half, about 20 min. Strain the wine sauce. (The dessert may be prepared to this point up to two days ahead, then refrigerated.) When ready to serve, pour the wine into a saucepan. Add the dates to the wine and heat gently, over medium low heat, until warmed through, but not hot. Place a dollop of mascarpone in the center of each of four plates. Spoon two dates and a little wine sauce on each plate, then sprinkle lightly with sea salt. **EW**

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