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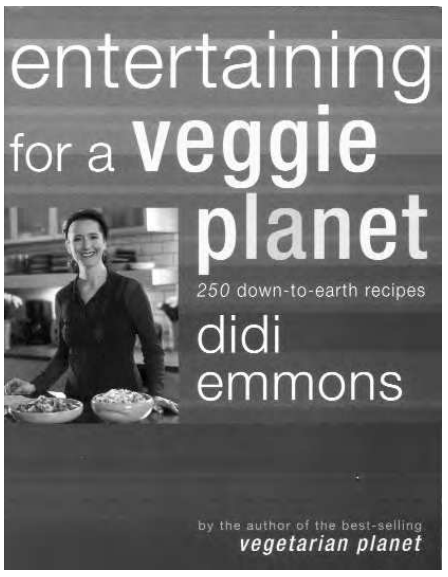
What Awaits

Champing at the bit to cook vegetarian.



ENTERTAINING FOR A VEGGIE PLANET, by Didi Emmons. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003. $18.95.

As a lifelong omnivore, one of the things I have always tripped on about the vegetarian menu has been my own presumption that such fare is always austere, always a chore to prepare and to enjoy, always missing … something.

I have lived in Eugene long enough now and dined heartily on enough vegetarian dishes to know that this presumption is false, false, false — from Ritta's veggie burritos to Café Yumm's Hot and Jazzy Deluxe to Cornucopia's Angela's Original veggie sandwich to any variety of pad thai selections in this town, there's no end to the vegetarian meals that make me forget about meat altogether. But still, on first mention of the veggie option, particularly preparing said option, my monkey mind jumps to what's missing rather than what awaits.

But Didi Emmons is changing my monkey mind. Author of *Veggie Planet* and chef of the Cambridge, Mass., restaurant by the same name, Emmons has authored a new cookbook, *Entertaining for a Veggie Planet.* Emmons' approach to food is hip and a little sassy, kind of Nigella Lawson meets *Laurel's Kitchen* and *Moosewood Cookbook Classics*, with just a pinch of Martha-esque propriety that makes me want to straighten my napkin and pay attention to the delicacy that is veggie cuisine. Included among the recipes are tips, and for lack of a better description, micro-essays on entertaining vegetarian-style. I particularly enjoyed a piece called "I have a dream …" where Emmons envisions the perfect vegetarian Thanksgiving. She writes, "I'll stir things up. I'll serve a series of the most inventive and scrumptious dishes, using local and unusual produce. Everyone at the table will enter a state of bliss, their personalities exuding love and warmth. Not even my father will notice that meat has been omitted." Another little essay titled "Come and Get it *Now*!" counsels guests not to dilly-dally and to sit when served, showing respect for the hardworking cook. Chapters include "Nibbles and Drinks," "Rent-a-Video Burgers, Pizzas, Sandwiches and Snacks," "'Companyments" (which includes a fantastically easy recipe for Chipotle Ketchup), and "Memorable Mornings," which celebrates breakfast and brunch and includes the recipe for French Toast Stuffed with Apples and Walnuts (see right). This is a great way to celebrate a free Saturday or Sunday morning (or afternoon!).

More than once since I received this book, it has been the first thing I pull off the shelf when I'm at a loss for a meal idea. The recipes are easy to follow and execute, though some of the ingredients, like pomegranates, black sesame seeds, truffle oil and miso, may be daunting to the novice cook. For the most part, though, Emmons keeps things straightforward, and she never skimps on flavor, including butter, cream, cheese and salt in recipes as she sees fit.

For those who have always gone vegetarian, this is a great book to freshen up the repertoire. For you new wavers, this could be the *Laurel's Kitchen* of your generation.

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French Toast Stuffed with Apples and Walnuts

(Serves 4)

3 oz. cream cheese
2 T. sugar
2 pinches ground cinnamon
2 T. unsalted butter
3 apples (preferably Granny Smith) peeled, cored and finely chopped
2 T. dried currants or raisins (dried cranberries also work nicely)
2 T. Cognac or orange juice
1/4 c. chopped, toasted walnuts
4 2-inch thick slices of soft white bread
1 large egg
1/3 c. milk

In a food processor (mixing by hand will also work), combine cream cheese, sugar, and cinnamon and pulse a few times. Set aside.

In a medium skillet, melt 1 T. butter over medium heat. Add the apples and saute until soft, about 5 minutes. Add dried fruit and Cognac or orange juice and cook until liquid evaporates, about 3 minutes. Add walnuts.

With a serrated knife, make a pocket two-thirds of the way into one bread slice (working on the short crust side), as wide as possible without cutting through the sides. With a butter knife, spread one-quarter of the cream cheese mixture inside the bread, and spoon in one-quarter of the apple mixture.

In a large, nonstick skillet or griddle, melt the remaining butter over medium-low heart. In a wide, shallow bowl, whisk together the egg and milk. Dip stuffed bread slice into egg mixture, turn and dip to cover the other side, and place in skillet. Continue with remaining slices and pan-fry until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Turn to brown other side, 3 to 5 minutes. Serve immediately. EW