

BEYOND BANANA BREAD ~ 2020 cookbook collection

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Los Angeles Times

(TNS) — Cookbooks are always about connection — written to share the love of a cuisine or celebrate ancestry, or sometimes to eulogize broken bonds and safeguard history.

If you've run out of ideas or motivation for preparing your next meal, if you're longing to be somewhere far away or want to explore fresh approaches to comfort food at home, or if you're thinking about the broader context of food in our troubled culture, take heart and inspiration from these standout books of the season.

Baking at the 20th Century Cafe

"Admit it," begins the jacket copy of Michelle Polzine's hefty, handsome book. "You're here for the famous honey cake." Well, yes and no. The 10-layer version of the Russian cake that Polzine serves at her cafe in San Francisco's Hayes Valley, given mysterious depths by caramelizing the honey and lightened by dulce de leche in the frosting, deserves its legendary status. Honestly? I likely won't bake this opus myself, nor roll out strudel dough thin enough to cover a table, as Polzine instructs; I will go eat them immediately on 20th Century Cafe's marble counter the next time it's safe to head north. But many other less involved and richly gratifying desserts (cranberry-ginger upside down cake, sherry trifle with Meyer lemon mousse, black walnut and buckwheat tea cakes) make the book worth owning. So does the indomitable life force of its author, whose mischievous spirit shines as brightly in her sentences as it does at her restaurant.

The Flavor Equation

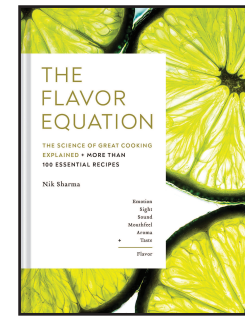
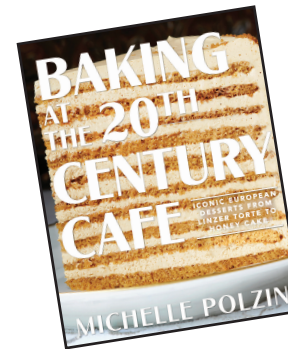
I can envision Nik Sharma — a molecular biologist turned pastry chef, columnist and author — lying awake at night, arranging and rearranging the elements of flavor in his mind the way Beth Harmon imagines moving chess pieces on the ceiling in "The Queen's Gambit." In his second cookbook, Sharma invites readers to consider recipes through the lens of science. Engaging charts on food pigments, aromas by chemical structure and the functions of taste buds lead to chapters grouped by aspects of flavor. Among them are "brightness" (spare-ribs in malt vinegar and mashed potatoes), "sweetness" (saffron swirl buns with dried fruit), "richness" (crab tikka masala dip) and "savoriness" (Goan shrimp, olive and tomato pulao). Dense in information and balanced by Sharma's color-saturated photography, "The Flavor Equation" never loses sight of the most critical calculation: deliciousness.

A Good Bake

When Sadelle's, a reimagining of a Jewish deli from New York's Major Food Group, opened in 2015, the buzz hummed loudest over Melissa Weller's pastries: the exceptionally delicate dough of her rugelach, the crackling layers of her salted caramel sticky buns, her plush take on chocolate babka. Behind the comforting sweets is a mind of science. Weller was a chemical engineer before switching careers, and she brings the discipline to breads and viennoiserie — and also to layer cakes and brownies. Which is to say: Don't be daunted by the length and detail of the recipes. Weller, who authored the book with Carolyn Carreño, writes in a precise but familiar voice. When she suggests letting the dough for oatmeal cookies rest in the refrigerator for four days to achieve an ideal crisp-chewy texture, trust the process: They are exceptional.

The Good Book of Southern Baking

Gently sweetened buttermilk cornbread. Angel biscuits (and drop biscuits and sweet potato biscuits!). Peach, blueberry and bourbon cobbler. Hummingbird cake brimming with pecans, pineapple, banana and warm spices. The world can use more top-notch Southern sweets right now. Kelly Fields — owner of Willa Jean, a bakery and restaurant in New Orleans loved as much by locals as visitors (which says a lot) — is one of this generation's virtuoso



pastry chefs. Her baked goods and desserts sing of the region without sliding into stereotypes; these recipes are honed but not daunting. Co-written with Kate Heddings, "The Good Book of Southern Baking" is the kind of cookbook you'll grab from the shelf, thumb through and say, "I can do this." Los Angeles photographer Oriana Koran stunningly captures New Orleans, Fields' kitchen style and (especially with the picture of Fields' hand smashing a strawberry cake on page 255) her wry humor.

Good Drinks

Non-alcoholic drinks concocted by our savviest bartenders have made quantum leaps since they first began appearing on menus under the wince-inducing label of "mocktails." Julia Bainbridge took a cross-country road trip in 2018, collecting recipes and tracing schools of thoughts around the subject (a big one: imitate classic cocktails or no?) into a compendium that considers every angle. Boozeless concoctions often lean syrupy. Bainbridge addresses this head-on: "The tension between sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami is what the palate wants in a drink whether it contains alcohol or not." Organized by their time-of-day appeal, with a helpful rating for the commitment level it takes to make them, these recipes bounce from hoppy to citrusy, creamy to herbal, refreshing to intense. One favorite: U-Me & Everyone We Know by former Los Angeles bartender Gabriella Mlynarczyk. It's an uplifting mix of tomato-watermelon-basil juice, simple syrup, lemon juice and a splash of umeboshi vinegar.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Look for the second part of this article in next week's GO! magazine.

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