

NEW YORK TIMES

EATING WELL

When Diet Books Don't Work, Try a Cookbook Instead

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Published: August 17, 2005

UNLIKE good cookbooks, which can become old family favorites, diet books come and go. Mostly they go, as one diet fad is supplanted by another.

Obviously they don't work, because Americans are getting fatter. So I have taken a different tack, selecting instead books that offer wonderful recipes and advice on how to eat well and healthfully without dieting.

One of the books is devoted entirely to wild salmon and salmon recipes; another is about grilling your way to healthier foods and a third offers help for the frazzled parent whose children eat only chicken nuggets. For the fourth entry I've chosen a book that some might consider a diet book, but it offers no silver bullets or magic formulas for food combining: its prescription is portion control.

Bobby Flay is among the cooks eager to help us eat better. The brash and talented Mr. Flay has grown up. He recently opened Bar Americain in New York, serving straightforward and very savory food and has also turned his attention to producing healthful dishes on the grill that are filled with big, bold flavors. Who would have thought that a book by Mr. Flay would contain nutrition analysis for each recipe. I've enjoyed Bobby Flay's *Grilling for Life* (Scribner, 2005) so much that I have already tried five recipes and am eager to work my way through the rest of them.

Mr. Flay has simple ways to replace fat. He uses deeply flavored sauces, vinaigrettes, relishes and salsas that add complexity and interest to a dish: a poblano pickle relish for turkey burgers, a green onion vinaigrette for bulgur salad.

The main ingredient in his desserts is fruit. I suppose Mr. Flay is also guilty of keeping the portions to sensible sizes: turkey burgers are 6 ounces each, not 10 or 12; the ground beef for the green chili burgers is 90 to 95 percent lean, not the typical 85 percent. The breads are whole grain, the fat is olive or canola oil. The foreword to the book, written by Joy Bauer, a registered dietitian who provided the nutritional analysis for the recipes, offers sage advice for using them: "Approach these nutritional analyses through the filter of common sense. If you have a heavy lunch, balance it out with a light supper, lower in calories and fat."

Salmon, a book by Diane Morgan (Chronicle Books, 2005) is the most sensible and reasoned book I have read on the debate over wild versus farmed salmon. That might be enough to recommend it but after the first 33 pages, devoted to the controversy and to advice on catching, cooking, buying, storing and preparing the majestic fish, there are excellent recipes that enhance the rich, delicious flavor of salmon.

Before writing the book, Ms. Morgan, who is a cookbook author and cooking teacher in Portland, Ore., traveled from Alaska to Norway and on to Scotland, where she fished for wild salmon and donned a "float suit" for a trip to what she describes as an exemplary salmon farming operation. Unfortunately the rest of us can't tell one farmed salmon from another in the supermarket. But in the end Ms. Morgan acknowledges that she is willing to pay the higher price for wild salmon because "I can see the difference, I can taste the difference, and now I know that it makes a difference to my health."

In addition to being a thoughtful advocate, Ms. Morgan is a talented and skillful cook. Her recipes include gravlax with a bit of gin in the curing process adding a juniper berry accent, and a visually stunning and equally delicious warm salad of asparagus, salmon, lemon vinaigrette and pine nuts. I put it together in 20 minutes. There are directions for cooking salmon on a cedar plank, a technique used by Native Americans in the Northwest for hundreds of years, and for hot smoking, a method much more popular on the West Coast than the East Coast.

But what I like best about the book are the recipes, like the shaved fennel, lemon and arugula salad and pan seared salmon, and salmon burgers with green onion and soy sauce mayonnaise.

In the aptly named *Barbarians at the Plate*, (Perigee Books, 2005) Marialisa Calta, who writes occasionally for *The Times*, has gathered child-friendly recipes that adults can tolerate, along with advice from a number of parents who have been successful in getting the little ones to the dinner table.

Ms. Calta is brutally honest: "the ugly truth is that cooking is work." But she argues that "unless we make family dining a priority, we are in danger of becoming a nation of barbarians at the plate." Even if parents do nothing else, she says, they should turn off the television during dinner.

Who wouldn't agree that home cooking is better than feeding children frozen French fries made with chocolate and squeezable margarine in shocking pink?

But some of the recipes given to her by other parents raised my eyebrows. Are there really young children who eat shrimp creole or anchovy sauce for pasta?

Nonetheless, the book is full of helpful hints (use rolls of polenta instead of cooking it from scratch). It provides some useful information on freezing, offers a basic list for stocking a civilized pantry and, of course, discusses how to make meals healthier.

The Portion Teller, by **Dr. Lisa R. Young**, a registered dietitian (Morgan Road Books, 2005), is an eye-opener. Every page is filled with another surprise, explaining why Americans are fat. Portion sizes in American restaurants are 25 percent larger than they are in Parisian ones. Some deli sandwiches contain one pound of meat, about three days' worth of the recommended amount in a healthy diet.

Emphasis is placed on all the temptations Americans face when shopping for groceries, going to restaurants and watching television.

Since controlling portion size is the key to successful weight loss and maintenance, the book offers interesting and practical advice on how to determine portion sizes just by looking: a baked potato that weighs seven ounces is the size of a computer mouse; the portion size for pita is the diameter of a CD.

Patron to waitress: I'll have two baseballs of salad with half a shot glass of creamy dressing and a deck of cards of sirloin steak, please.

It sounds pretty silly, but following **Dr. Young's** suggestions is a sensible way to keep from becoming an obesity statistic.