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Introduction

Maggie

I was a waitress; he was a chef. The look on his face was priceless, or more aptly put, tasteless. I had just finished my shift and had meandered back to the kitchen to request a little lunch. Being as it was a steak and seafood restaurant, I wasn't going to be ordering off the menu. All day I had served dishes of dull, mahogany meats enhanced by the colorful vegetables on the side. That tasty color was exactly what I was after—a plate of bright grilled veggies. I approached Sean and asked if he would honor my request. He quickly responded with “Sure, no problem” and turned toward the grill with zucchini and peppers in hand. “But wait!” I blurted abruptly. “Could you grill them on a spot where no meat has touched?”

That look. I will never forget that look. It was the beginning of our ego-driven culinary competition. I had to prove to Sean that vegetarian dishes had more “meat” than even he could handle. This idea, this debate, this work in progress is a culmination of our bittersweet arguments and delicious devotion to food. Our difference of opinion is why we had to write this book together—to prove our tastes, our reasons, our passions—and to one-up the other.

This is not your typical cookbook. It is an Iron Chef duel, a sort of tit for tat, a “challenge then be challenged.” In the “She Said” section, I give one of my seasonal veggie recipes to Sean, and he retaliates carnivorously with a suitable match. In the “He Said” section, Sean gives me a meaty recipe, and I have to concoct a vegetarian version. We look at each other's recipes in terms of taste, color, presentation, method of cooking, and so forth, so we're not simply mocking the same dish but rather reworking it, like directing the same play but using different leads. We exchange scripts and recast.

In “He Said” I try to find the “star” that will either look or feel the part in the recipe plot that Sean has given me. I avoid using a “double” to fit the “role,” so I'm not using the many soy-meat substitutes available on the market. Soy shrimp, soy turkey, soy hot dogs, soy hamburgers, soy chicken breast, and more are available, but none of these carry any nutritional value to speak of. In my opinion, these impersonators carry too much baggage: sodium, stabilizers, and preservatives. They are also overprocessed beyond nature. I want my “lead” to shine on its own merits. I believe a vegetarian diet should center around not fleshless meats but fresh, seasonal foods that will vitalize your body, mind, and spirit.

In some of my recipes, I have cast tofu, tempeh (soy), or seitan (wheat gluten) as the meat “actors” since these ingredients are minimally processed. Tofu is made from soy milk, which is curdled and pressed into cakes in much the same way cheese is made from cow’s milk. The result is a sort of custard with a texture like that of a soft, fresh cheese. Tempeh is cooked soybeans that have been pressed into cakes or patties. Tempeh’s texture is chewier and more substantial than tofu’s, and it has a nutty flavor. Seitan is often referred to as “wheat meat” because it is derived from wheat gluten. It has a very firm and chewy texture, making it the most meatlike substitute in the vegetable kingdom. Tofu, tempeh, and seitan all have fairly neutral flavors, making them the ideal chameleons in the kitchen, ready to take on any flavor they are given.

In “He Said” I found it easy to conquer the challenge of Sean’s dishes by allowing local and fresh ingredients to spotlight my counterdish. I encourage the use of organic foods, especially for certain fruits that are more likely than others to deliver health-damaging pesticides (for example, zest of lemon rind and the delicate porous-skinned strawberry). I also often specify the use of “heirloom” fruits and vegetables. Heirloom refers to open-pollinated, nonhybrid native plants. Heirloom is to commercial produce what Grandma’s home cooking is to fast food. You can taste the difference. Although many heirloom vegetables are out there, heirloom tomatoes seem to be the hot trend now, making them more available in the marketplace. I encourage you, the reader, the chef, the diner, to shop farmers’ markets for high-quality, fresh, seasonal, local produce. Most farmers’ markets proudly offer heirloom vegetables for their unique sizes, shapes, and colors.

One of the key ingredients in all my recipes is one that all of Sean’s recipes lack—the flavor of compassion. Pure, wholesome, karma-free food from the plate to the palate. Good, clean eating with a good, clean conscience. Let the challenge begin!

Sean

I met a little girl named Maggie; I guess you could say she was . . . a vegetarian.

It was back in '97. I was working the grill at a local steak and seafood restaurant, and Maggie had just been hired as a waitress. Our debate, and in essence this book, sprang to life about an hour after we met. She asked me to grill her up some veggies, which I was more than happy to do, but then . . . she asked, "Could you please cook them on a part of the grill that hasn't been touched by meat?" The look I gave her was not one of horror but rather utter disbelief. My grill was about the size of a school desk, and the place was a high-production steak and seafood restaurant. What was she thinking? She started the cry-me-a-river clamor over cows and chickens. I, fresh out of culinary school, ranted on about how a vegetable's sole purpose was to sit and look pretty alongside my center-of-the-plate creation. The conversation was heated and ended with her refusing to eat the vegetables that I refused to make.

The debate continued, shift after shift, year after year, and within it we found common ground. Although we disagreed on what a person should eat, we did agree that it should be good. Being good means fresh, organic, awe-inspiring, and flavorful. From this common ground our friendship grew, though it was never lacking debate. She would constantly ridicule my choice of flesh, and I often told her a little pork fat would give her dishes some flavor. From this badinage came the book. The dueling swap of recipes side by side with our rib-poking, slashing-to-bits commentary is a mirror to the fellowship Maggie and I have enjoyed these many years. We have a camaraderie that has been most dear and has helped to create the chef I am today.

That being said, don't be a vegetarian if you don't have to. You're missing out on the deliciousness, the gist, the marrow of life! Literally. Look, when it comes down to it, eating in its simplest form is consuming a life to sustain your own. Whether that life comes from the field or the barn, it should be respected as such. With respect should come gratitude and with gratitude should come an elegant meal.

Roasted Fennel Frittata

2 pounds fennel bulbs, thinly sliced (reserve fronds for the custard)

10 garlic cloves, minced or pressed

2 teaspoons sea salt

2 teaspoons black pepper

3 tablespoons olive oil

10 free-range eggs, beaten

1 cup sour cream

1 cup grated Asiago cheese

1 cup chopped fresh parsley

½ cup minced fennel fronds (tops)

Sea salt

Black pepper

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Toss the fennel and garlic in a bowl with the salt and pepper, coating well with the olive oil. Spread evenly on a baking sheet and roast for 30 minutes or until the fennel and garlic are golden brown. Stir after the first 15 minutes to ensure even browning. Set aside to cool.

Add the sour cream to the beaten eggs and whisk until smooth. Stir in the cheese, parsley, and

fennel fronds. Season lightly with salt and pepper. Add the cooled fennel and garlic mixture, including all the juices and browned bits from the baking sheet. Pour the mixture into a 9 × 13 baking pan, cover with foil, and bake in a bain-marie at 375 degrees for 1 hour or until set.

(A bain-marie, or water bath, is made by setting the baking pan inside another, larger pan filled with water halfway up the side of the baking pan.)

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FENNEL SEASON STARTS in the late fall and peaks in the spring. The feathery greens conjure up images of new growth and fresh tastes. The aniselike flavor is transformed by the custard and should not deter those who have an aversion to licorice flavors. Frittata is a light, protein-rich meal that can be enjoyed any time of the day – brunch, lunch, or dinner. The leftovers are excellent wrapped in a tortilla for a satisfying breakfast burrito. Sean might argue the authenticity in the preparation of my “frittata” since I have baked the dish entirely in the oven and not on a stovetop first. But Sean claims the name “strata” for a dish that traditionally includes bread as a main ingredient. So here we have successfully matched our recipes with one culinary terminology flaw to another. Not so strata, not so frittata. I think Sean should rename his recipe the Aorta Stop-a-Strata. I admit I have my share of dairy and eggs, but come on! Does he really need to invite the pig and chicken to the full yolk and cream cheese party? Carnivores who are able to sleep through their heart palpitations will be taking a long nap after his cholesterol-rich dish.

Eric-a-Strata

10 whole eggs
3 egg yolks
1½ cups milk
Kosher salt to taste
5 red potatoes, parboiled and sliced, with skins on
¼ cup (2 ounces) shredded cheddar cheese
3 ounces roasted chicken breast, cubed

3 strips bacon, cooked and chopped
2 ounces cream cheese, cubed
3 fresh basil leaves, chiffonade (sliced very thin)
One 6-ounce can artichoke hearts, drained and quartered
One 4-ounce jar roasted red peppers, sliced
1 tablespoon diced red onion
1 cup cubed sourdough bread

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Combine the eggs and milk in a bowl, lightly season with salt, and whisk. Line the bottom of a greased 9 × 13 casserole dish with half of the sliced potatoes. Fill with half the cheddar cheese, chicken, bacon, cream cheese, basil, artichokes, red peppers,

onion, and bread cubes. Top with the remaining potato slices and pour in the egg mixture. Blanket with the remaining cheddar cheese and bake, covered with foil, for 45 minutes. Remove the foil and bake for 10 minutes or until the middle seems firm and the cheese is bubbly. Serve hot and enjoy.

TO PARBOIL POTATOES, place the washed, whole spuds in a pot of cold water on the burner at high heat. As soon as the water starts to boil, turn off the fire and let them sit for five minutes. Drain the potatoes, let them cool, and slice them as thin as you can.

One of the beauties of this egg casserole is its versatility, enabling you to use the freshest ingredients of the season or something canned from the pantry. Also, this dish will feed a large number of people with very little preparation. It can be made the day before, kept in the refrigerator overnight, and go straight from fridge to oven when needed, though you should increase the cooking time 10 to 15 minutes. Note that I have omitted pepper from the ingredients list. Pepper tends to discolor egg custards – if they are not cooked relatively quickly, they will turn a rather unappetizing shade of orange. Pepper and eggs don't really mix anyhow. If you want to add a little spice, use Tabasco sauce – it will wake up you *and* the eggs!

About this squabble over terminology that Maggie and I have enmeshed ourselves in – I say pick up a *Food Lover's Companion*, flip through, and come to your own conclusion.

All interpretations aside, you are basically getting about a day's worth of cholesterol with just one of these eggs, so you might as well throw in some bacon. You will have to walk an extra mile after either of these gratifying breakfast fête anyway, so relish the greatest savory flavor known to man, bacon.

Crustless Spinach and Mushroom Quiche

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| 8 free-range eggs, beaten | 1 teaspoon black pepper |
| 2 pounds sour cream | ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg |
| 1 cup finely chopped fresh parsley | 1 pound chopped fresh spinach leaves |
| 2 tablespoons garlic powder | 4 cups sliced mushrooms |
| 2 tablespoons onion powder | 1 cup minced scallions |
| 2 teaspoons dried basil | 1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese |
| 1 teaspoon sea salt | 1 cup shredded smoked provolone cheese |

Whisk eggs and sour cream together until smooth. Whisk in parsley, garlic powder, onion powder, basil, salt, pepper, and nutmeg. Stir in the spinach,

mushrooms, scallions, and cheeses. Pour into a well-oiled 9 × 13 baking pan. Cover with foil. Bake in a bain-marie at 375 degrees for 1 hour.

SINCE THIS QUICHE IS SANS CRUST, I cook it in a 9 × 13 pan rather than the traditional pie shell. Sean, being culinarily correct, of course insists on a crust. I can hear him now: “How can it be a quiche without a crust?!” Well, it is. So there. If you take Sean’s side and prefer a crust, simply divide the mixture into two pie shells. Crust or no crust, the most important component here is the filling. Organic, free-range eggs are a must if you want to avoid traces of steroids and antibiotics in your food. Factory farms produce unhealthy birds, which in turn produce unhealthy eggs. Buy eggs from small, local, organic farms and your quiche will show the difference. The yolks will have a brighter yellow hue, golden and healthy like sunshine. Trust me, you will taste the difference.

April showers bring more than mayflowers. Wild mushrooms crop up through the moist spring soil. For a more unique taste, check out the hand-harvested fungi available at the farmer’s market. This recipe is the vernal version, but a quiche can be made with a new ingredient year-round. Use the custard ingredients as a base and substitute the season’s bounty. There are 4,876,232,154 variations on a vegetarian quiche.