

GROW GREAT GRUB: ORGANIC FOOD FROM SMALL SPACES

by Gayla Trail
Clarkson Potter, 208 pp., \$19.99



With the growing trend to “go local,” more and more people are choosing to grow their own herbs, fruits, and vegetables at home: It’s a great way to control the exact varieties that you eat and add some interesting new things to your menus, and with research, you can grow those best suited to the climate where you live. As one who has been gardening organically for nearly 20 years, I love to see new gardeners give it a go. This is a nifty little guide book for the novice gardener, especially those with limited space. After all, Gayla Trail gardens on a rooftop in Toronto, and my first garden on an apartment balcony in Austin consisted of herbs, chiles, and tomatoes growing on wooden produce crates rescued from the restaurant where I worked.

Trail covers every base to get started, whether you have a small backyard, an apartment balcony, or a tiny patio. From choosing containers to building raised beds, making compost and soil mixtures, starting seeds, and companion planting, the book is full of useful tips designed with economy and frugality in mind. Cool projects like growing potatoes in a trash can and the make-it-yourself upside-down tomato bucket will encourage anyone and are fun for kids. Each plant described includes container-growing suitability and best varieties for the job, plus recipes for using the fresh rewards from the garden as well as preserving the fruits of your labor. Even for seasoned gardeners, the book offers useful tips and money-saving ideas, like the self-watering pot, the holey hosiery onion holder, and the make-your-own chile *ristra*. With beautiful color photos throughout, this handy little companion will make you get out in the garden and get your hands dirty. — C.A.

WHY ITALIANS LOVE TO TALK ABOUT FOOD

by Elena Kostoukovich
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 480 pp., \$35



How true it is that the best and fastest way to understand a culture is through its food! I’ve spent the last 15 years or so studying the relationship between foodways and people and feel that through this passion I have gained a decent grasp of culinary anthropology from many parts of the world. But upon reading this magnificent tome on the food culture of Italy, I feel like a baby in diapers. What a fantastic job she has done, translating her experiences as a non-native living in and understanding Italian food culture over the last 20 years. Elena Kostoukovich, a native of Russia and translator of Umberto Eco’s work, has carefully noted and explored the intricate relationship between Italians and their food in an amazing collection of essays that focus on the deep differences between regions, noting specific specialties of each. As Eco himself writes in the foreword: “In Italy, perhaps more than anywhere else ... discovering local cuisine means discovering the spirit of the local inhabitants. Try tasting Piedmontese *bagna cauda*, then

Desserts

CAKEWALK: A MEMOIR

by Kate Moses
Dial Press, 368 pp., \$26



Though award-winning novelist Kate Moses and I have almost nothing in common, I recognized her as a kindred spirit when she described how the practice of baking helped her make sense of an otherwise difficult world. Moses’ artfully told stories about a painful childhood, a disastrous early marriage, and the eventual discovery of her own distinctive voice as a writer are framed with inviting recipes. The baker in me was primed to explore the recipes, and the writer in me could certainly appreciate the quality of the prose. But I soon realized that a cover blurb likening the book to stories from the childhood of Augusten Burroughs crossed with the culinary education of *Julie & Julia* wasn’t entirely a compliment. Moses’ writing is lyrical, but a steady diet of 200-plus pages of childhood and adolescent angst became difficult to digest. On the other hand, I found myself envious of her relationships with legendary writers M.F.K. Fisher and Kay Boyle, and some of the recipes inspired me to fire up the oven on a hot, muggy day – a recommendation in and of itself.

– V.B.W.

the Lombard soup *cassoela*, then *tagliatelle* Bolognese-style, then lamb *alla romana*, and finally Sicilian *cassata*, and you will feel as though you might have moved from China to Peru, and from Peru to Timbuktu.”

To say that Italians love to talk about food is an understatement. Italians are their food, probably more than any other culture in the world (although Mexicans must be a close second.) Touching on art, politics, poetry, literature, and pop culture, Kostoukovich takes on subjects such as *sagre*, the traditional festivals celebrated all over Italy centered on one specific seasonal foodstuff; the intricacies and myriad pasta shapes and the proper sauces to use with each; the much-discussed Mediterranean diet; the slow food movement; and the many cooking techniques used for specific dishes in specific regions. Her painstaking research is something to be savored slowly, carefully, and with great joy – not unlike a fine Italian meal. I can’t recommend this book enough to anyone with a serious interest in foodways, regardless of their origin. *Bravissima*, Elena! — C.A.

IN THE GREEN KITCHEN: TECHNIQUES TO LEARN BY HEART

by Alice Waters
Clarkson Potter, 160 pp., \$28



Alice Waters is arguably the biggest name in all of foodie land. Often credited with originating the entire farm-to-table movement, her influential *Chez Panisse* cookbooks, her involvement with the slow food movement, and her tireless work to improve nutrition in our public schools have made her a household name. I had to ask myself: “Does she really need any more publicity? Perhaps I should review a cookbook by a less well-known author.”

But after reading and cooking through a stack of recent cookbooks, the fact remains

that *In the Green Kitchen* is simply one of the best published so far this year, and the one that I am most eager to shout from the rooftops about. It’s not just a collection of recipes: It provides, in its unique structure, something that has been missing up until now in the American food reawakening. It is a manual of cooking techniques – not elaborate ones but the everyday techniques that most recipes breeze over, assuming that the cook has simply absorbed these techniques along with other general knowledge.

But in reality, most people follow cooking directions the best way they can figure how, often guessing at what technical terms mean, with predictably less-than-stellar results. *In the Green Kitchen* takes all the basic techniques – such as simmering, braising, poaching, grilling, blanching, roasting, filleting, and wilting – and has an expert in that technique (usually a renowned chef) explain it by walking the reader through a simple, signature recipe. Waters also takes techniques that we all think we know how to do, such as boiling pasta, making rice, toasting bread crumbs, washing lettuce, kneading bread, and roasting a chicken, and gives them the same treatment. The result is a collection of really useful, delicious, signature recipes that at the same time functions as a substitute for the hands-on cooking instruction most of us did not get as young people.

It is always a cause for rejoicing when a book can function on more than one level this way; for the experienced cook, the recipes are the payoff, and for the beginner, the technical instruction makes this a great buy. Add in the gorgeous full-color photos and the defining principles of freshness and simplicity in cooking, and Waters has hit another ball out of the park. — K.T.

WORLD CHEESE BOOK

Edited by Juliet Harbutt
DK Publishing, 352 pp., \$25

There have been quite a few attempts by cheese experts to codify their knowledge for consumers, but none of the previous books

THE ICING ON THE CUPCAKE: A NOVEL

by Jennifer Ross
Ballantine Books, 336 pp., \$15 (paper)



I may be the last (wo)man standing against the national love affair with cupcakes. But I admit, after reading and baking from Austinite Jennifer Ross’ *The Icing on the Cupcake*, I could be close to conversion. The author, along with her heroine Ansley Waller, is a cupcake aficionada, and she’d like you to be one, too.

When not busy licking the spatula, Ross’ tongue is planted firmly in her cheek as she spins a slyly hilarious yarn about a privileged Texas sorority chica’s journey to self-awareness, with cupcakes as both means and metaphor. Ansley, endearing only in her cluelessness, is a mean girl – selfish, superficial, unkind, and blinded by bling. When her perfect fiancé dumps her, torpedoing her perfect plan for a perfect life in the Dallas ‘burbs, she decamps in despair to her worldly Manhattanite grandmother. In the Big Apple, Ansley discovers that graduating Hockaday and a debutante “Texas dip” don’t cut much ice, but (surprise!) she finds some gumption, a *métier*, and the ability to stand on her own two stilettos. This tale is as fluffy and improbable as a seven-minute frosting, but Ross, formerly a journalist for *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Wall Street Journal*, exhibits style and an ear for cultural nuance.

This is a classic beach read with recipes; it’s certainly possible to simply devour *Icing* as the chick-lite novel that it is. Even better, though, is to hop to the kitchen and try some of the 23 cupcake concoctions with names like The Devil Made Me Do It and I Liked It, a feather-light mocha with peanut-butter-cream filling. Although there’s an occasional recipe disconnect between numbers of cupcakes and amounts of icing, each recipe I made was interesting and tasty. And, as Ansley learns, passing out cupcakes is a great way to endear yourself to the neighbors. — M.M.P.



have managed to be as useful and well-put-together as this compendium – recently nominated as the 2010 Le Cordon Bleu World Food Media Awards Best Food Book – which examines more than 750 cheeses from every cheese-exporting country.

Juliet Harbutt, one of the world’s leading authorities on cheese, is a crisp, no-nonsense person in both her speaking and writing styles. Her straightforward approach is very effective at demystifying the hundreds of varieties of artisan cheese that are now available. First, she groups the cheeses by country of origin and name, making any cheese you wish to look up very easy to find. A tiny map of the country of origin shows exactly where the cheese is produced. A small, simple chart gives specifics, such as the size of the entire cheese, what sort of milk is used to make it, and how long it is aged. Two full-color photos illustrate each cheese: a close-up of its color and texture, and a picture of the cheese in its entirety. The process used to make each cheese is noted, along with tasting notes and recommendations for serving it, including dishes in which it is traditionally used.

Harbutt also provides all the basic information on how cheese is made, including the processes involved in making fresh cheeses, aged cheeses, blue cheeses, semisoft cheeses, hard cheeses, and flavored cheeses. She also discusses the various fat contents of different cheeses, bringing the good news that cheese is significantly lower in fat than generally thought. The information is so user-friendly and thorough that if you take this book to the store with you, even the most elaborate cheese counter will utterly lose its power to daunt you. I’ve found myself feeling eager to put together cheese plates for company and confident about trying new cheeses, even expensive ones. — K.T.

In *Grow Great Grub*, Gayla Trail, the founder of the leading online gardening community (YouGrowGirl.com), shows you how to grow your own delicious, affordable, organic edibles virtually anywhere. *Grow Great Grub* packs in tips and essential information about: Choosing a location and making the most of your soil (even if it's less than perfect). Building a raised bed, compost bin, and self-watering container using recycled materials. Keeping pests and diseases away from your plants the toxin-free way. Growing bountiful crops in pots and selecting the best heirloom varieties. Cultivating hundreds

Grow Great Grub: Organic Food from Small Spaces. Buy Now. Grow Great Grub Pros and Cons. Pros. Cons. Fresh Food from Small Spaces teaches you about a lot more than 'traditional' small space gardening. It is a guide to urban and suburban homesteading. R.J. Ruppenthal shows you how to grow vegetables, mushrooms, and sprouts, but branches out into producing fermented foods, keeping bees, and raising chickens. Small-space gardens are perfect for people wanting to eat on a budget or more locally. Find out how to grow a small space garden in this book. Grow Great Grub packs in tips and essential information about: - Choosing a location and making the most of your soil (even if it's less than perfect) - Building a raised bed, compost bin and self-watering container using recycled materials - Keeping pests and diseases away from your plants the toxin-free way - Growing bountiful crops in pots and selecting the best heirloom varieties - Cultivating hundreds of plants, from blueberries to Thai basil, to.