

Super Natural Cooking - "Super Naturally Good"

Faith Kramer, Paper Palate - If food blogger Heidi Swanson's new cookbook was a recipe, it's directions would read: mix one part text book, one part how-to book and one part coffee table photography book and then season to taste with directions for thoughtful, tasty (and colorful) vegetarian dishes.

Supernatural Cooking: Five Ways to Incorporate Whole & Natural Ingredients into Your Cooking was written and photographed by Swanson, well known for her 101 Cookbooks blog, as a way to educate others on how to use better-for-you ingredients. The book focuses on a wide range of natural foods that are becoming more and more available in supermarkets or have good availability in local specialty, natural, organic or ethnic food stores. She also includes a list from A to Z of internet food resources.

Swanson skips the preachy stuff and assumes her readers understand the value of eating less processed, higher fiber foods highlighting seasonal fruits and vegetables. She gets right down to discussing the purchasing, storage and usage of grains such as teff, quinoa and amaranth; sweeteners such as agave nectar and natural cane sugars; and fruits and vegetables such as acai and hijiki, as well as more familiar ingredients including whole wheat flours, sweet potatoes, lentils and beans, and green beans.

Swanson has focused on every day food, providing 80 recipes aimed at packing more flavor, nutrition and color into breakfast, lunch and dinner without much fuss, special techniques or elaborate presentations. The recipes are written in a straight-forward, easy-to-understand style that should appeal to all sorts of eaters and all levels of cooks. Even kids (or picky adults) should be tempted by "Baked Purple Hedgehog Potatoes," "Yucatan Street Corn" and "Thin Mint Cookies." Every recipe is accompanied with Swanson's color photographs of the dish.

Her photography throughout the book is lush and vivid, with photos of fruits, vegetables, prepared foods, people, objects and even fabrics combining to give a vibrant impression of the passion behind Swanson's natural food mission.

While the book's organization (chapters include "Build a Natural Foods Pantry," "Explore a Wide Range of Grains," "Cook by Color," "Know Your Superfoods," and "Use Natural Sweeteners") work well for breaking down the topic into specific natural foods lessons, having recipes for say salads or soups spread out over a few chapters make it a bit difficult to use when you are just looking to be inspired to pick out something in a specific category, but it is a great book to sit down and read or browse when you have the time. It is not a menu-driven cookbook where you can easily pull together a three course meal for company (although many of the dishes would work for that); it's more of the kind of cookbook where you look at a recipe and say, "I'll make that for dinner tonight."

So far I've made one recipe from the book, "Roasted Tomato and Paprika Soup" (click on the link for my experience making it and a recipe.) It was relatively simple and straightforward to make, and roasting the vegetables and using the smoked paprika added extra dimension to the soup. I am looking forward to making the "Espresso Banana Muffins," "Farro with Green Onion Sauce, Toasted Walnuts and Asparagus" (at least once asparagus is back in season at a reasonable price), "Big Curry Pot Noodles," "Winter Rainbow Gratin," "Acai Power Popsicles" and the recipe (and photo) that made me swoon and have to buy this book, "Fig Spread with Black Pepper and Toasted Sesame Seeds";

The book is published by Celestial Arts, a Ten Speed Press imprint. The Ten Speed site for the cookbook has an excerpt, as well as several of the recipes (click on link and then choose the recipes tab) including one for "Mesquite Chocolate Chip Cookies." No, the dough isn't grilled over a wood fire; the recipe uses mesquite flour, which is ground from the plants' roots. One of the few really esoteric ingredients (at least to me) Swanson uses, she gives a substitute in the recipe and a resource to buy it from online in case you can't find it locally.