CORRECT LINE COOKING

Hitting the S Spot

It's time to turn away from the heated debate section of ALR and snuggle into the heated bootie section. Here your only function is to taste, or to murmur gentle words like 'mmm' or 'yum'. Your tongue was not made only to form clever arguments or nasty putdowns. Relax and let Aunty Penelope take over.

Speaking of heated booties and other wonders of advanced consumer society, I wonder if anyone out there can explain a disturbing phenomenon which I have observed during my frequent trips to David Jones. I refer, of course, to the lack of Teasmades or is it Teasmaids? These wonderful inventions combine an alarm clock with a tea or coffee-making function which brews a nice cup of tea (or coffee) before the alarm goes off. The ingestion of caffeine can then take place without one's feet ever hitting the ground. Perhaps the makers of electric booties bought out the Teasmad concept as the lack of cold makers of electric booties bought out their sales? I know not, but I have been forced to fall back on compliant lovers in order to get cups of tea without first shivering my way to the kitchen. Life is tough.

This is actually a sneaky and incredibly suspect way of introducing a book which I want to review; the New Internationalist Food Book, by Troth Wells. I expected a total lack of mechanical gadgets in its pages and, perhaps, constant reminders of How Lucky We Are. ("Walk three hours for your water. Forget your firewood? Too bad, that'll be another half a day, and no, you can't wear your Reeboks.") I am pleased to report that The Food Book celebrates the diversity of food around the world, and that the world 'blender' does appear from time to time, although those Australians who do not possess such essential items will also be able to use the book.

The recipes given in The Food Book are modified for "Western kitchens", which explains why one finds a reference to blenders next to a photo of a Zambian woman wielding a mattock (or at least I think it's a mattock, never actually having wielded one). Many of the recipes give alternative ingredients should a particular item be impossible to procure.

The recipes come from Africa, Asia and Latin America, or so the book's cover tells us. In fact, there is at least one recipe from North America, which is for Cornmeal pancakes, or Pone—a native American dish. Australasia is referred to once only—as a commercial producer of passionfruit. It may be pedantic of me, but the invisibility of a whole continent seems odd in a book which goes to the length of modifying its map of the world to exclude Eurocentric bias. This, I suspect, is connected to the treatment (ie, non-treatment) of hunter-gatherer cultures as a stage surpassed "about 12,000 years ago". A recipe book need not mention such things, but The Food Book is trying to do more than just give recipes and should therefore be more in tune with history. (Incidentally, the text is better on gender issues.)

The last paragraph has rocketed me from the realm of fluffy security I promised you into the cold hard word of analysis, and I apologise on bended knees. Let me spread the rug of humorous security back over your mind. I assure you that this book is well worth buying, and the recipes have given me much pleasure, as well as the occasional twinge of guilt as I decide whether to eat a dish from Mali or Haiti. Oh, what the hell, if it's Friday, why not try Burkina Faso? I should point out that okra are little green vegetables of a delicate tapering shape and I was delighted to learn they are also called lady's fingers. This is somewhat ironic given that the book makes clear that most of the world's agricultural mattock-wielding is done by women. You should be able to get okra quite easily. I could get it in Canberra, after all.

Fish Stew with Okra
Recipe from Burkina Faso (serves 4-6)
675 grams freshwater fish, cut into pieces, or equivalent amount of frozen white fish
3 tablespoons peanut or other oil
1 onion, sliced
3 carrots, sliced in rounds
6-8 okra, halved lengthwise
1/2 teaspoon chili powder
1 cup/100g tomato paste
1 cup/225g cabbage or spinach, sliced
2/3 cup/100g green beans
a little water
1 cup/200g rice
2 cups stock
salt
1. First heat the oil and cook the onion, carrots, okra, chili powder, salt and tomato paste for 5-10 minutes.
2. Then put in the fish, cabbage or spinach, beans and a little water to provide some moisture for cooking the vegetables. Cover and cook gently for 5 minutes.
3. Now add the rice, pour in the stock, bring to the boil and cook for 20 minutes, or until the rice is cooked as you like it, adding more stock or water as necessary to prevent the rice from drying out.

I understand the next edition of The Food Book will be totally vegetarian so as to help fat Westerners give up on meat which gobbles up so many resources (oh yes, and rainforest). This strikes me as a tad prescriptive, but I'm sure there are just as many good vegetarian meals in the world as recipes for carnivore fodder. The Food Book already has a number of the former, and they're worth trying. Have a look at the book if you see it around, or if you're really keen, get in touch with the New Internationalist. As winter closes in upon me, curries and chilli hit the S Spot (stomach) most sweetly. With these recipes and my electric booties, even winter in Canberra seems less cold.

Penelope Cottier.