

KITCHEN YOGA REVIEW

Porridge for icy mornings, and a tangy cardamom fruit salad for hot summer days. Margaret Davidson's passionate embrace of life, yoga, food and the seasons, skips us through tantalising pages of delicious recipes, quirky philosophy and sound common sense in her new book *Kitchen Yoga*.

Her zest for what the Buddhists call "the ten thousand things" is infectious. This book is full of information about food values and how they relate to our well-being. For instance, black walnuts are 28% protein as opposed to lean beef which is 22%, but the author warns readers not to get trapped by statistics and instead, just to remember that nuts and seeds are designed by nature to be a highly sustainable winter food.

Interspersed with fascinating, personal stories, starting with her African childhood apprenticeship with a family cook called Mpishi, the author leads us gently into a more universal look at how we eat and how we can re-assess ourselves and our environment. She is an experienced yoga teacher and her abiding respect for food in all its shapes, colours, tastes, nutritional values takes readers on a journey sightseeing over the way foodstuffs relate with each other, and how we relate with each other, with plants and with animals.

What I enjoyed most was her benevolent admonitions about tolerance and inclusion. If you are looking for a strict health guide you won't find it here. The reader doesn't have to start locking his or her cupboard door on their wine and coffee. On the contrary, we are warned instead that while an exact dietary regime might purify the body, it might also starve the soul!

The book is attractively produced with delightful, coloured illustrations. There are some nice touches. The picture of the lamb that heralds the Spring section, turns into a sheep by Summer, for instance. The seasonal sections remind readers of

the rhythm of the tides, climate and light changes. There are subtle appetite bracers - her keen enjoyment of a walking meditation in December, on a diamond bright day and unyielding frost underfoot, invite the reader to just try walking in awareness of the moment. Then you can come indoors and warm up by tucking into an Aduki Bean Cottage Pie, savouring the firey taste of creamed horseradish running through the potato mash topping.

In February we learn that Margaret's grandmother used to put a cut onion into a shoe placed by the bed of a cold sufferer – and she claimed that it banishes the sniffles. Then we are tempted by the author to try a stuffed onion recipe with sage, mushrooms and gruyere cheese, surrounded by a sauce enriched with crème fraiche or tofu.

There are lots of choices for people on medically restricted, low fat, or dairy free diets. One of the nightmares for the genial host welcoming friends and family, with different food tastes, to the table is to find a dish they can all enjoy. For those dedicated to a holistic way of living, and the world of non separation, there are imaginative ideas so that meat-eaters, vegetarians and vegans can sit down together and share delicious, albiet meat-free, meals. It reminded me that in Italy, where cooks serve wonderful meat roasts, they have no section on their menus for vegetarians. Classic meals are sometimes vegetarian, and sometimes with meat, and Italians relish the vegetarian meals equally.

Kick starting the Spring section is a juice squeezed from carrots, apples, black grapes and fresh ginger. Male readers can then note that pumpkin seeds tone the prostate gland (they are chewed, it seems, by nomads travelling the North African desert). Another tip for general health comes to us from the Prophet Mohammed – black onion seeds! Still in the region, a recipe for a lemony Couscous Casserole seasoned with cumin, coriander, and cinnamon sticks, provides a spicy reminder of how simple food can be both delicious and exotic. There are

lots of ways to perk up everyday vegetable servings. One I like is an instruction to stir fry broccoli flowers with root ginger, honey, lemon, tamari and olive oil. It will probably transfer well to cauliflowers, beans, mange touts and julienne carrots too.

There are lots of confections for those with a sweet tooth. Nothing needs be too labour intensive either. How about boiling red wine, honey, stem ginger and a cinnamon stick together, and pouring the sauce over a compote of mixed dried fruit which has soaked overnight? Baked for an hour and served with fresh yoghurt, it sounds irresistible. Or you can serve it with ice-cream. Plenty of cooks have sat with their home-made ice-cream trying to jab a spoon into a rock-hard surface. No longer! All we need to do, we are advised, is just add brandy – or any other liquor – to the cream before freezing.

Flowers as food and food as medicine are not neglected. The author relates how her aunt used to scald humble cabbage leaves and use them to poultice swollen knees when they had cooled enough to be bearable. Herbs, seeds and spices, they are all here, but with such an enthusiastic garnish, the author inspires us to have a fresh look at many old favourites which get forgotten in the culinary merry-go-round of daily life.

The book is divided into six sections. One serves up ideas for breakfasts, snacks, packed lunches and drinks. Another introduces meat, fish and poultry. One of the attractive aspects of the writing is the author's complete absence of moral superiority - not always the case with self-professed vegetarians.

Living in Africa as a small child, with its unforgettable reminders of food scarcity, Mrs Davidson has a healthy regard for protein in any form whether on the hoof, foot, plant or swimming in the water.

She recalls ice-packed vacuum flasks containing precious vaccines being despatched to Tanganyika by her father, only to return crammed with ice-packed lakeside fish which the entire

household, including servants, feasted on with gusto. On another occasion, she was less happy to discover that Shamba Boy, the family's gardener, had served up her missing pet rabbit for lunch one day, putting her off rabbit dishes for life.

Meat or vegetables, dairy or fish, her message is the same. Food is energy and energy is transferable whether it comes from organically-grown vegetables, or intensively-reared animals ready-packed for the supermarket.

Remarkably, the author has taught yoga for many years to prisoners in five of the prisons in the North East of England. For people who live confined lives, whether in hospital or in custody, this understanding of the transferability of energy is a comforting and encouraging message, especially for prison yoga students restricted to a regular diet of chips and burgers.

A section on classic roasts, chicken dishes and one of Mpishi's Fish Bakes, gives way to a scrutiny of grains and pulses, including some intriguing recipes like Millet Souffle! While discoursing on polenta, the author remembers a prison class she taught where a young man found his (singing) voice for the first time after some rounds of yoga chanting. These delightful asides are as mouth-watering as the recipes.

Section Five focuses on vegetables and the human heart chakra, it seems, is associated with the colour green. Whether we bake, roast, stir-fry, grill, steam, braise, boil, or serve raw, we are advised that vegetables should be fresh and properly stored, prepared and cooked – and there are attractive and sensible tips on how to do all three.

Whether you are a natural bread or cake maker or not, the Baking chapter encourages you to plunge your hands into the mixture since touching what you are making brings out its soul (a favourite maxim of the Chinese)! The kneading and proving gives way to a section on milk, sugar, fats and supplements.

The author maintains that an occasional binge on chocolate and fry ups is not going to cause harm in the long run, but a nightly indulgence will make an impact. We are encouraged to eat whole foods, and eschew refined or fragmented foods – common sense for most people interested in staying healthy. There are some good alternatives to sugar listed, as well as some natural sweeteners for stewed fruit you might not have thought about.

It is all here – everything the food enthusiast needs to know -from vitamins and the importance of colour on the plate, to identifying a suitable grace to honour the meal set before you. When the stomach growls, is there anyone of us who isn't interested in what we put in our mouths?

If your appetite has become jaded of late, or you are tired of cooking, or you need something to get the saliva buds flowing, I recommend *Kitchen Yoga* wholeheartedly. It is a feast for the whole being and a wonderful celebration of life.

Review by Sandy Chubb