

A Burst of Flavor: The Fine Art of Cooking with Spices

Kusuma Cooray

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This is a cookbook with weight and authority. A native of Sri Lanka and chef-instructor at the University of Hawaii's Culinary Institute of the Pacific, the author trained in England and France. She blends these gifts into a cookbook teeming with flavors that marry her Eastern heritage with her Western skills.

This is not a cookbook for the faint of heart or palate. It feels as if it took its cues from culinary school textbooks. More than 200 recipes with shiny color photos occasionally call for ingredients-fresh methi (fenugreek), curry leaves, and gotu kola greens-that all but the most serious city-dwelling cooks will find daunting to locate.

Cooray's recipes are well written, although they are often fussy with ingredients and garnishes that are unrealistic for the everyday cook. Roast Carved Rack of Lamb with Pickled Cherries asks the cook to sear the lamb with blanched garlic, prepare a sauce and a batch of pickled cherries, and to prepare julienned vegetables. Cooray mixes cherries, cloves, cinnamon, garlic, neem leaves, watercress, celery root and rosemary in this one dish.

Cooray shines when she offers simpler Eastern dishes polished with her Western training. Her Indian inspired Spicy Kabocha Pumpkin is a succulent braise of roasted rice, coconut, and onions in buttermilk. Pink Lentils with Angel Hair Pasta combine cumin, garlic, green chiles, and chives with tomatoes and lentils for a delicate but appealing East-West main course. Basmati Rice with Chives and Black Cumin Seeds takes an Indian comfort food classic and turns it into a dish fit for a fancy New York restaurant.

For all its color and flavor there is something missing in this cookbook. With its provocative title readers will look for guidance on the qualities and use of seasonings. Cooray devotes but four short pages and scattered headnotes to seasonings and fewer than ten pages to a glossary of culinary terms and foods. What could have been an opportunity to free cooks from their fear of seasoning ends up another intricate, albeit tasty, recipe book.

NANCY K. ALLEN (September / October 2001)

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