ForeWord Reviews

COOKING

A Cowboy in the Kitchen: Receipes form Reata and Texas
Grady Spears
Robb Walsh
Ten Speed Press
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The author of this cookbook used to punch cows. Now he tells you how to cook them. Realize some other things about this book… first, it's a good read. Wedged between recipes is cowboy lore and Texas history. Second, the restaurant name comes from the big old ranch in Edna Ferber's novel, Giant, maybe even better known from the '50s movie starring film legends Liz Taylor, Rock Hudson and James Dean.

Spears, head chef at the Reata (rope in Spanish) Restaurant in Fort Worth, is a character and his recipes and writing (a tip of the Stetson to co-author Walsh) have real flavor. It's funny to think of him spinning his stories over a hot commercial stove. Try this from his section on pies:"There's a retired Texas Ranger named Joaquin Jackson that comes into the Reata in Alpine a lot. He's a tall, rugged-looking, no-nonsense hombre who chased crooks and cattle rustlers all his life, but he'd also be the first to tell you that he bakes a mean buttermilk pie."

Readers will find cowboy recipes here you may never see bound in another book. You almost hear the cattle lowing when you read "Yaller Bread with Pintos" or "Ranch Beans." But there is also a to-hell-with-tradition feeling to many of the dishes. Examples include stacked pheasant enchiladas in salsa verde or chicken burrito with mushrooms and goat cheese pesto. Spears talks about crossbreeding and how his restaurant mixes American and Mexican ingredients, noting "…as long as it tastes good, who cares?"

Some of the meat Spears uses may surprise readers. One stew calls for calf brains; a main dish requires kid goat. Even if the recipes don't become part of a reader's rotating favorites, the friendly explanations Spears provides for these unusual dishes is worthwhile. Wedged between recipes are Spears' musings, like folksy tales told 'round the campfire. We learn about cowboy coffee (just boil the grounds right in the water and never wash the pot) and how women changed cowboy life. There's a whole section devoted to sourdough. Who knew that starter was so valued in those early days out on the range that chuck wagon cooks often slept with the stuff on cold nights to keep it "alive."

Besides intriguing main dishes, the cookbook includes sections on game birds, one-pot meals, soups, vegetables, chili, condiments, desserts and a sneaky peek at some of Spears' cooking secrets. And by the way, don't forget to name your sourdough starter.

Carol Hopkins