



Food of Asia

Periplus

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As a chef once said, food in Asia is an exercise in tradition, in aesthetics, mutual caring and moral lessons.

This delightful book, like the food it describes, was created with tradition, aesthetics and obvious care in mind. The Food of Asia is a quick tour of the highlights of the cuisines of China, Japan, India, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. This is a cookbook reminiscent of Time-Life's Food of the World cookbook series published in the 1960s and 1970s.

Put together by long-gone professionals like James Beard, Michael Field and Laurens vander Post, the Time-Life books are full of history, priceless photos and great, well-researched recipes that have withstood the test of time. Except for well-known writers, The Food of Asia could be a modern version of the Time-Life series.

The Food of Asia, a total delight for a chef, fodiem or Asia-lover is not a book for the beginning cook. The recipes, while not always overly complicated, often offer strange new tastes, food combinations and ask for esoteric ingredients which would try all but the most motivated and dedicated cook's patience. In the Vietnamese section banana blossom salad with duck and ginger calls for young banana blossom and rau ram leaves. The section on Malaysia and Singapore has a recipe for snake gourd.

Admittedly, there are extensive sections on unfamiliar ingredients and the Asian kitchen (which covers important cooking implements), but finding them in smaller cities without an Asian population might be difficult. These sections are complete with photos, which are extremely helpful for identification of unfamiliar foods and tools.

These unfamiliar foods are sprinkled throughout the book. The bulk of the recipes, compiled by well-known chefs from each region, surpass its goal of offering recipes that are authentic and different. Some of the recipes are absolutely alluring: tea-smoked sea bass, seared bonito with tangy dressing, roast duck curry, shredded chicken with chilies and lime, minced seafood satay.

The Food of Asia is an intriguing travelogue and culinary journey through eight distinctly different regions of Asia and Southeast Asia. Each section follows a pleasing and easy to use format of short historical and social introduction to the region, a few suggested menus, a helpful key of the essential flavors of each cuisine and recipes. The book is well illustrated with great photos, although not always of the dishes the reader might want to see for help on constructing a dish. At \$29.95, this cookbook is a real value even as a coffee table or reference book: the reader gets eight fascinating books in one.

NANCY K. ALLEN (January / February 1999)

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