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Great Menus: Seasonal Recipes for Entertaining

Patricia Lewis Mote
David Harp, photographer
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Among the bookstores' crowded cookbook shelves, Patricia Lewis Mote's *Great Menus: Seasonal Recipes for Entertaining* should clearly standout. "Patsy," as she signed her introduction, has assembled an easy-to-follow guide to meal planning and party organizing based on a reservoir of experience gleaned from her role as "Hostess and Mother in Chief," while her husband served as president of the University of Maryland for twelve years.

Great Menus is constructed around a series of events that any reader could encounter in the course of a year. There is a chapter each on brunches, luncheons, picnics, seasonal meals, and dinners, as well as on "Fast Fridays" and "Frugal Feasts," the latter suggesting that a good meal need not bust the budget.

Great Menus is a cookbook that succeeds in removing much of the mystique from preparing outstanding food, with the recipes accommodating even the inexperienced cook. Mote introduces shortcuts whenever possible without sacrificing quality: for instance, using packaged puff pastry for the topping of a chicken potpie. To prevent cooks from feeling overwhelmed before a big event, she emphasizes advanced preparation, noting that many of her recipes can be made, in part or in whole, days ahead of time. She also encourages cooks to enlist the aid of their children as a nice way to bring the family together for a rewarding experience.

Especially useful in *Great Menus* is the introductory "Basics" chapter, in which Mote sets the tone for her approach to cooking and entertaining. "As our seas become more depleted," she says, "we must become vigilant in the seafood we buy." When it comes to other ingredients, the author tries to buy "local and sustainable," but offers a few websites for purchasing harder-to-find food items and says she relies on imported pasta and canned tomatoes.

Mote believes good food—made from quality ingredients assembled by the cook, not dumped out of a box or jar—makes for good parties. Her recipes are varied and never dull. The *Pate a Choux*, pastry dough that serves as the basis for confections such as cream puffs and beignets, is an essential for elegant entertaining. *Red Pepper Soup*, the centerpiece for a Holiday Vegetarian Luncheon, is quick to assemble and festive. *Bob's Super Souffle*, incorporating prunes infused in Armagnac and topped with Crème Anglais, will tempt any daring desert lover. And Mote's chicken stock recipe can be followed by anyone who can boil water.

For the new cook, *Great Menus* is an ideal primer. For those more experienced in the kitchen, it will stir the imagination, resulting in more creative meal and party planning.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (February 17, 2011)

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