Clarion Review

Cooking

Love on a Plate: Recipes for Serving Love
Sandra Sage
978-1-4343-4703-9
Three Stars (out of Five)

In these days of online recipe sites and bookstores crammed with every kind of cookbook imaginable it's a bit hard to justify another cookbook unless it is wildly original excitingly ethnic or eminently practical (quick health-conscious low-fat or inexpensive). Also welcome are cookbooks that combine food writing humor or homespun essays along with recipes but these really demand literary gifts or regional color in order to stand out. Sage's offering leans towards the latter group but is too ambitious to be a homestyle cookbook while not quite creative enough to really break out in either literary or culinary terms.

The book's essays are of a spiritual bent and are sweet and heartfelt. They might have served better if sandwiched between recipes; a cook is unlikely to read through all of them in the first 150 pages of text. The recipes themselves derive from both the author's catering business and from somewhat southern-style home cooking or generic home entertaining &224; la *Sunset* magazine and the like. Instead of one particular organizational scheme many recipes are grouped in categories such as "Five Roses Catering" or "Farmer's Harvest." This is problematic as there is no index of ingredients or dishes so it's difficult to know that Barley Mushroom Pilaf is grouped with Veggie Meals or that Baked Salmon with Boston Glaze is in the Caterer's Pride section.

Looking at the recipes one finds some interesting ideas such as offerings for pumpkin soups blackberry chutney and date nut bread flavored with tea. Recipes tend to be nicely uncomplicated with short ingredient lists. But a closer look reveals some problems with precision. For example the Herbed Polenta asks for ¾ cup of cornmeal and two cups of Parmesan—an overwhelming amount of cheese. The directions state “Stir in cheese” but further on say “Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese.” Is this in addition to the two cups? The Baked Crusty Polenta doesn’t specify if polenta is instant or regular and requires “1 tsp dried oregano and basil.” Is this one teaspoon each or together? A fledging cook would be flummoxed.

Recipes in general are a bit of a throwback less to old-fashioned home cooking than to the era of frozen and canned vegetables and canned cream soups all of which are frequent ingredients here. Numerous recipes include unconscionable amounts of cream or cream cheese even in offerings like Marinated Mushroom Salad and Spaghetti Casserole. Neither the adventurous nor the health-minded cook would approve and the beleaguered “throw dinner on the table” types have better options with frozen or ready-to-serve meals.

One could certainly create some nice meals from a careful selection of offerings here but overall this work is a labor of love that would be more relevant for the author’s friends family and business associates than for the general public.

Laurie Sullivan