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Cooking

Off the Menu: Staff Meals from America's Top Restaurants
Marissa Guggiana
Welcome Books
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For Marissa Guggiana, destination trumps any issues of distance if it means camaraderie and good food. In researching *Off The Menu*, she visited fifty-one of the nation's best restaurants, sharing staff meals with the owners, chefs, waiters, and bussers. Her inventive book presents one hundred recipes for those dishes, grouped by restaurant—Seattle's Lark, Aquavit, in Manhattan, and Bluestem, in Kansas City, among them. Clearly, this is more than just another cookbook.

Guggiana's introduction to each section conveys the quality of the experience and the character of the places and people she met. This is enhanced by profiles of owners and chefs, revealed through the classic Escoffier Questionnaire, a series of queries regarding favorite foods, kitchen equipment, ingredient sources, etc. Who knew that so many leading tastemakers would choose a cheeseburger over foie gras? As with all enticing cookbooks, there are sumptuous photographs of food. But the lens here is also trained on "families" of workers sharing an amazing meal either before or after the dinner service. These behind-the scenes additions make this book entertaining for even wannabe cooks.

Of the recipes that form the heart of the book, Guggiana hopes that they will encourage her audience “not to cook longer, but to cook smarter,” to try the recipes, and to adopt this mantra: local, organic, fresh, and seasonal. Unless you’re Mario Batali, none are menus to throw together before running off to a child’s ball practice, but the novice with a grasp of techniques and vocabulary will find dishes to try immediately (buttermilk fried chicken, meatloaf, oatmeal cookies) and ones to grow with (wild boar ragout or Banh Mi sandwiches). Those who know their way around the kitchen intimately will relish the rediscovery of “down home meals,” whether home is New Orleans or New Delhi. Each recipe is preceded by a brief introduction that reveals Guggiana’s personal connection to the dish, hints at what makes it extraordinary, and occasionally gives advice: what is a good substitute if wild boar is unavailable?

As a third generation butcher, author of *Primal Cuts: Cooking with America’s Best Butchers*, and president of Sonoma Direct, a purveyor of sustainably raised meat, Guggiana knows great food. She likens eating in a great restaurant to a museum-going experience, saying it “seeds inspiration and shifts in perspective.” Her enthusiasm spills onto each page with prose as evocative as freshly picked basil.

Geraldine Richards