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Eat Your Vegetables and Smile! Vegetarian cookbook author Mollie Katzen to speak in Lafayette Oct. 29

By Lou Fancher



Mollie Katzen Photo Lisa Keating

Cookbook author and illustrator Mollie Katzen changed the reputation of cauliflower from lowly, loathsome vegetable to sexy "Cauliflower Cheese Pie with grated potato crust" in 1977 with the publication of her best-selling "Moosewood Cookbook." Suddenly, "vegetarian" no longer meant a trip to the restaurant salad bar. The term became synonymous with succulent Succotash Chowder, Exotic Walnut Paté and Montana's Mom's Dynamite Cheesecake blowing everybody out of their naturally spring-fed water.

Of course, she didn't do it alone. But it seemed that way to us pioneering "veg heads" whose meals achieved the pinnacle of gastronomic grossness on airlines. Recalling the result of ordering "vegetarian meal" (during that antiquated time when eating meals on a plane was admittedly risky, but happened), is akin to a nightmare. Rice, shredded carrots and raisins eternally stewed in a dark sauce mysteriously similar to the substance coating a nearby passenger's chicken still causes shudders.

But Katzen and her merry band of "Moosewood People" at the Moosewood Restaurant in Ithaca, N.Y., served delectable food, both on the plate and on the pages of their collective cookbook. It came with no dogma attached. Eating vegetarian was less about not eating meat - the restaurant served fresh fish on weekends - and entirely concentrated on creating fresh, flavorful meals. Most recipes included a solid dose of sour cream, butter or cheese. Or all three.

Four years after Berkeley's Ten Speed Press published Katzen's hand-written and mostly self-illustrated first cookbook, she split from the restaurant, rather unhappily. Subsequent cooking and book-writing followed: "The Enchanted Broccoli Forest;" a trilogy of children's cookbooks; several collaborative projects, "Get Cooking," and others. A casual perusal of her (now) 12 books is rather like watching a cake rise in the heat of an oven. Baking is evolution and so were the years she became a James Beard

Cookbook Hall of Fame inductee (2007), published less artful companion cookbooks for a 26-part public television cooking series (1997) and consulted with the Harvard University Dining Services, where she co-created their Food Literacy Project (2003-11).

With her September 2013 release, "The Heart of the Plate," Katzen finds an old/new hybrid. The 500-page cookbook is sprinkled with her art: nearly every page boasts a whimsically rendered painting or her bold, tightly cropped photographs. Although it's slightly sterile, especially compared to her earliest books, the visuals stir fond, even nostalgic, '70s era memories (although not of airline meals).

Katzen claims, in the book's subtitle and brief introduction, to have developed "recipes for a new generation." The changes are slight, but paradigm shifting. Pasta "peppers" a main (pasta) entree now mostly composed of vegetables; garlic and specialty oils replace yesterday's cream and butter sauces; novel texture, color and flavor blends are center stage. Moving from menus to soups, salads, stews, mashes, suppers from the oven, burgers, pancakes, and desserts, plus the expected grains, vegetables and sauces, there is a casual, light hand in Katzen's contemporary kitchen.

Katzen's soups have always been evidence of how simple ingredients can be made into a nectar worthy of the gods without being "fancy." Green Matzoh Ball Soup requires only seven everyday ingredients. (Unless you prefer to avoid store-bought stock and make Katzen's vegetable stock. Even that has only six ingredients; the most "exotic" being garlic.) Salads are equally accommodating: Fattoush, a Middle Eastern bread salad is fun to say and even more fun to eat. A bounty follows: Very Simple Lentil Stew with Cottage Cheese Dumplings (optional, but unless you are vegan, make them), Roasted Cauliflower Mac and Cheese (she's still got the magic with this cruciferous item), Cajun-Style Tofu Burgers, and "mashes" (vegetable "beds" or "nests" made of mashed vegetable-spice blends) - and to top it off, Bittersweet Mocha Bundt Cake, Bruléed Persimmon Pudding and more.

More than half of the recipes are vegan and most come with appealing suggestions for additions or variations. Best of all, they come without the heavy definition and heavier dining of 30 years ago - and without that recipe for disaster served to frequent vegetarian flyers. "The Heart of the Plate" is filled with fresh, simple, fantastic vegetables. Vegetable eaters, rejoice.

Katzen lives in Berkeley and is a popular speaker on subjects relating to sustainability, nutrition and community. She will be appearing at a Commonwealth Club event at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 29, in conversation with John Birdsall, senior editor of Chow.com, at the Lafayette Library, (3491 Mt. Diablo Blvd, Lafayette. Check-in time is at 6 p.m. Cost: \$22 non-members, \$12 members, \$7 students (with valid ID).

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