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Schaefer on Wine Rapt in Food and Wine

by Dennis Schaefer

Looking for a gift for the foodie or wine connoisseur in your life? The following are my picks from this year's books.

"Been Doon So Long, A Randall Graham Vinthology" (UC Press, \$34.95) is probably my favorite wine book of the year; certainly the most articulate. The irrepressible "winemaker for life" at Bonny Doon Vineyard, Randall Graham, has finally collected his zany and sometimes outrageous thoughts, observations and puns in a book. A compendium of the best bits from 20 years of the winery's newsletter, along with other detritus from his fertile mind, this book is not for everyone. But if you've closely followed the California wine scene for the last couple decades and enjoy pun-filled literary riffs on Dante, Cervantes, Joyce, and Ginsberg, this tome is so erudite and funny that you will even be checking the footnotes for further insight. Randall Graham is certainly the philosopher king of the winemaking world and "Been Doon So Long" is the evidence.

Spanish wines are on fire right now and Spanish cooking is not far behind, further heightened last year by Mario Batali's "Spain: A Culinary Road Trip" (Ecco, \$34.95) and the concurrent 13-part PBS series. Now a more thorough picture of Spanish cuisine is presented in the first paperback edition of Teresa Barrenechea's "The Cuisines of Spain, Exploring Regional Home Cooking" (Ten Speed Press, \$27.99). From Galicia to Andalusia, a wide range of dishes are offered, including tortilla espanola, octopus salad, sizzling garlic shrimp and a half dozen versions of paella. On the other hand, San Francisco chef Gerald Hirigoyen concentrates on tapas in "Pintxos, Small Plates in the Basque Tradition" (Ten Speed Press, \$24.95). Tuned to the California home cook, he features 75 recipes for small plates or "pintxos," including prawns with garlic chips, griddled ham and cheese bocadillos, seared tuna with onion marmalade and beef short ribs. Happily, Chef Hirigoyen suggests many specific wine pairings too.

Meat is back in a big way and John Torode's "Beef: And Other Bovine Matters" (Taunton, \$34.95) is a really good guide around all parts of a cow. Of course, a "how to cook a great steak" chapter is obligatory but he also adventurously includes Thai satay with peanut sauce, braised oxtails and celery root mash, slow-cooked pot pie and sweetbreads in pancetta. Meat is also the main ingredient in "Big Bob Gibson's BBQ Book" (Clarkson Potter, \$24.99), written by Chris Lilly. Big Bob's has been a destination barbecue joint in Decatur, Ala., for more than 80 years and Chef Lilly has been the pitmaster for 15 years (and married to Big Bob Gibson's great-granddaughter). He dishes out barbecue secrets on every page about how to achieve moist and succulent results. Among the highlights are recipes for mushroom-crust beef tenderloin, grilled soy and lime beef tri-tip, and their famous barbecue chicken in white sauce as well as many variations on dry-rubbed ribs and whole pig. Grillmeister Fred Thompson mixes barbecue and grilling together in his "Grillin' with Gas" (Taunton, \$19.95). A good and wide-ranging primer on gas grilling, the mouth-watering selections include Seattle salmon burgers, baconized tuna with lemon butter, maple-kissed pork chops and Fred's finest baby back ribs.

After Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans chef Donald Link of Herbsaint realized how fragile that region's traditions were, particularly the culinary ones, so he set about to document them in "Real Cajun" (Clarkson Potter, \$35). He's both a native Acadianan and James Beard award-winning chef, so he dishes up such rustic local fare as Billy Boy's crawfish etouffee, cheesy spoonbread, Lake Charles dirty rice and fresh peach buckle.

Aussie-born chef Curtis Stone, who trained under Marco Pierre White in London and now lives in Los Angeles, wants to create his own tradition of easy entertaining, California style, in "Relaxed Cooking with Curtis Stone" (Clarkson Potter, \$32.50). His cooking is clean and uncomplicated and zeros in on the flavor punch in dishes like lazy asparagus omelet, barbecue chicken quesadillas, steamed mussels with chorizo and white wine and slowly cooked brisket with a barbecue bourbon sauce.

When the cooking gets tough, the good chefs grill hamburgers? That's the case for "Bobby Flay's Burgers, Fries and Shakes" (Clarkson Potter, \$25.95) and Hubert Keller's "Burger Bar" (Wiley, \$22.95). Whether it was an early reaction to the economic downswing or just a personal preference, both chefs opened a series of burger joints where the usual greasy spoon, grill-top fare is anything but ordinary. I know what you're thinking: I don't need no stinking chef to tell me how to grill a hamburger! But these chefs work in a different flavor universe than most. Chef Keller's French background shows through in blue cheese-stuffed bacon sliders, BLT turkey club burger and mac and cheese burger. Chef Flay's spicy self is on display in the garlic butter burger, wild mushroom cheddar burger and California burger (avocado, jalapeño, cilantro and Monterey Jack). Both books feature interesting side dishes, sauces, shakes and other drinks.

Two of the most beautiful volumes of the season are dessert books. "Rose's Heavenly Cakes" (Wiley, \$39.95) by Rose Levy Beranbaum is stunning in its presentation with a great layout and crystal-clear directions for making the likes of chocolate banana stud cake, sticky toffee pudding or coconut cheesecake with coconut cookie crust. Likewise "Absolutely Chocolate" (Taunton, \$29.95), from the editors of Fine Cooking magazine, indulges in all things chocolate, including bourbon chocolate cake, chocolate-orange biscotti and triple chocolate ice cream pie.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the books of two great California chefs, "Ad Hoc at Home" (Artisan, \$50) by Thomas Keller and "New Classic Family Dinners" (Wiley, \$34.95) by Mark Peel. In what might be regarded as a trend, both books focus on family-style dinners though their approach is anything but casual. While both chefs want to make their home dinners "accessible," that's a tall order considering their fine-cooking background. Simply put, to cook the way of these chefs will take two things: advanced planning and time. So you really need to thumb through these books to see if the extra prep steps are worth it for you. Having said that, Chef Keller shows the way with buttermilk fried chicken, grilled cheese sandwiches, beef stroganoff and roasted leg of lamb, while Chef Peel embraces pan-fried trout, eggplant Parmesan, lobster potpie and clams casino. These are familiar dishes executed in a gourmet style that's way more Julia Child than Rachael Ray.

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