

(This review originally appeared in *Pirene's Fountain*)

Cooking with the Muse: A Sumptuous Gathering of Seasonal Recipes, Culinary Poetry, and Literary Fare

by Stephen Massimilla & Myra Kornfeld visit www.cookingwiththemuse.com

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Reviewed by Linda Kim

As a cookbook for poets and a poetry book for cooks, *Cooking with the Muse* is both a culinary and a literary triumph. Stephen Massimilla and Myra Kornfeld make their collaborative efforts accessible and enjoyable for everyone by focusing on that all-too-human tendency: loving great food. They argue that cooking has not only played a rich role in literature but also irrevocably altered the history of poetry. By inspiring generations of poets, food has been the subject of a timeless dialogue of veneration in which the poets of one age go on to impact the next.

Kornfeld, chef and author, crafts delicious seasonal recipes and educates us about the art of selecting ingredients, cooking and eating well. She promotes health and ecological sustainability through her in-depth nutritional research, which stems from her deep devotion to chasing the freshest and most local of ingredients. She enthusiastically tackles the challenge of introducing “complex and global” flavors to readers, flavors inspired by a range of cuisines from Turkish to Japanese, American Southwestern to Italian, an array defining and reflecting a veritable “cross-fertilization” of culinary cultures.

Massimilla and Kornfeld give each recipe a lovingly delicious, decadent introduction. They clearly delight in language and exotic descriptions when they deem sautéed pears “tawny-amber, butter-spiced little womb mouths” or when they ascribe a particular savor that is “part redolent mint, part rain-steeped flower, part citrusy syrup” to the cardamom in their Dirty Chai.

In a glorious call-and-response to Kornfeld’s recipes, Massimilla provides poems entirely his own. He does so with his own rendition of “My Dirty Chai”:

Eye black as devil as coffee,
breath of tea, complexity of leaf.

Your fleshy kisses
above the rim, your Darjeeling eyelids slanting rhyming

lashes. To press another kiss to the skin of the milk.
To taste the lotus

beneath the ambergis...

(continued...)

An award-winning poet, Massimilla is also an erudite professor: he is well-versed in the history of food and its surrounding literary cultures. He gives poetic context to the recipes by connecting the ancient with the modern. By providing the accompanying lore, background stories, and etymological notes pertaining to relevant ingredients and dishes, he explores the historical and almost mythic presence of these foods. The poetry of food is truly a literary tradition.

Demonstrating an awareness of and respect for various literary legacies, the book also contains Massimilla's literary essays, which range from poetic descriptions of the seasons and the cuisines that go with them to commentaries on and close readings of famous culinary and seasonal poems. The likes of Herrick, Keats, Dickinson, Hopkins, Frost, Rilke and Williams are all quoted from, their words and lines as enmeshed with and embedded in a love of food as Massimilla's own. And many contemporary poets, such as Wendell Berry and Jane Hirshfield, are featured here as well.

In creating this "anthology of seasonal dishes," Kornfeld and Massimilla evoke the "deeply imaginative, meditative, and nurturing landscapes of the poet." The interplay between recipes and poetry is organic, as a poem will often inspire a recipe or vice versa, and sometimes even the way a poem is paired with a recipe will inspire other associative musings. It is evident that "Both food and poetry are realms of innovation and recreation." Indeed, just paging through the book is an experience in and of itself—a glimpse into the nature of the creative process that also challenges our preconceptions of how art can unfold.

With a densely lyrical yet playfully traditional feel, Massimilla's poems evoke the sumptuous and inviting experience of bouquets and feasts. Sprinkled throughout the book in its various sections, like delicately placed spice atop fine desserts, his poems make us hungry for more. His focus on the process of fabrication reads as a greater meta-textual reflection on his collaboration with Kornfeld. Greek mythology, as seen, for instance, in his poem "Kore Sets the Record Strait," inspires not only the poet but also the cook whose muse inhabits the book. "Seared Tuna with Purple Potatoes and Cherry Tomato Sauce" is both the title of a recipe and the title of its mirroring companion poem, as each stanza evokes a step in the process of cooking the dish.

Massimilla's poem "Sunday Was" elicits emotion by having the reader relate to the speaker's wanton anticipation of a good meal. Yet Massimilla is also capable of exquisite subtlety, presenting images that blend into metaphor. In "How to Eat the Artichoke," his speaker calls to mind a battlement when he describes the arduous process of scraping, sucking, and lodging "...platinum paste / behind the crenellations of your teeth." He orders the medieval defense of "scalding oil," which then flips, switching to an innocuous "hot ice blossom / of garlic / floating in lemon water, a cluster / stripped past delicacy..."

His treatment of ingredients as poetic objects of study reveals a keen artistic mind. To him the tomato is "The ripened eye, / the sun-red bite." A pomegranate is the "true fruit of the Eden, womb-hive." Wild broccoli florets house a "sanatorium for green

monkeys,” while celery root is “Artery-twisted / on the outside” like “the torn. blood-dragged glove / of a poor ogre’s heart.”

Vivid and vivacious, his poetry hits us with flashes of color. Oceans sparkle with “emerald olive oil.” A Stellar’s jay flies “Fruit-blue, flecked with mist-light.” The aroma of Halloween pumpkins emanates from “crack-toothed grins” of “orange flesh.” In “Yellow From the Fire,” the poet goes all-out with an onslaught of yellow hues:

Yellow fish and lizards, yellow crowns
of cockatiels. Leafy seahorses are yellow
in the Philippines. Never mind jaundice or wasps.
Think butterflies, banana pies, four and twenty
blackbirds’ beaks, sweetest part
of the pineapple, but to be arbitrary:
saffron pistils, tigers’ eyes...

He is also thoroughly mesmerized by seasonal changes, weather patterns, and the passage of time. Heavy, thick layers of humidity churn in the recursive lines, “Summer is like nothing but summer / of salt and primordial soup.” Compare this heaviness to the open airiness of spring when, in “Miracle Fruits,” he muses upon a “watered and beatific garden” that contains “tenderly stripped, leafless blossom-cups.”

Both wholly original and a remix of the old, Massimilla’s poetry pays homage to archaic styles and invocations; what had inspired the great, the ancient, the aged now inspires him. Always there is a suggestion of reverence in his words, of the undeniable weight of history. His diction and syntax, prosody and rhythm, reveal a deep appreciation for the progression of poetry.

Life itself is a reflection of such ever-evolving traditions: “Like poetry, food and cuisines are profoundly bound up with identity.”

At the core of who we are as human beings is an understanding of how these interwoven influences across cultures and time culminate in modern beliefs and values. What do we stand for? What do we think? In how food is sourced, how it is prepared, how it is served, and when it is eaten, there is an innate dynamism. This dynamism is revealed in how friends and family interact and relate to one another. Something is lost with industrialized agriculture. Kornfeld and Massimilla aim to bring us back to our roots.

Cooking with the Muse: A Sumptuous Gathering of Seasonal Recipes, Culinary Poetry, and Literary Fare

A review by Hannah Howard

The best poems are utterly delicious. Like a soul-satisfying meal, to share, savor, devour, and digest them is one of life’s true joys. They make a day brighter, a

romance more romantic. They capture our imaginations, stir our hearts, make us softer, better.

In *Cooking with the Muse: A Sumptuous Gathering of Seasonal Recipes, Culinary Poetry, and Literary Fare* (Tupelo Press, 2016), co-authors Myra Kornfeld and Stephen Massimilla extol the happy, profound (yet rarely explored) culinary-literary marriage with 150 ingredient-driven and poetically-inspired recipes, intertwined with food-centric poems, essays, and stories.

A bibliophile's cookbook? A chef's foray into the literary? Yes and yes. But there's more, and Kornfeld and Massimilla's "love, respect and admiration for the deep philosophical, personal, and emotional value of the earth and traditional approaches to farming, cooking and eating" unfold on page after page. *Cooking with the Muse* is a love story, and an ecstatic one.

Great food starts with gorgeous ingredients. Talented chefs have a way of taking a beautiful carrot, say, and highlighting, elevating its carrot-ness. *Cooking with the Muse* celebrates the perfection of nature's stunning gifts. There are plenty of fish recipes (Cornmeal-Crusted Cod; Seared Tuna with Purple Potatoes and Cherry Tomato Sauce, and a poem by that same title) and meat recipes (Cranberry-Glazed Roast Turkey; Plum Brisket), but, given how they show up even in the dishes I just mentioned, as well as in so many of the poems, fruits and vegetables play a starring role throughout.

It makes perfect sense that the season's bounty gets plenty of time on stage. The unfolding of the year's seasons is both the organizing principle and the heartbeat of the book. The volume begins with a divine autumnal Blackberry Parfait and a luscious essay on Galway Kinnell's luscious poem "Blackberry Eating." Unveiling delight after delight, the book weaves through winter and spring and concludes with summertime's crimson cherries. This is the cycle of life, loss, and rebirth as told through the poetic celebration of wholesome, soulful, and big-flavored dishes.

Take the "ephemeral and verdant" vegetables of springtime. Each March, winter's frost thaws to make way for sweet shoots and bright greens—renewal, possibility, and a whole lot of flavor. We learn about William Carlos Williams's "sluggish / dazed spring" and Jefferson's gentlemanly asparagus. Rilke's luxurious lines echo a Spring Greens Soup "that tastes delightful and variegated, an ode to an entire birthing garden."

...The soup! Fresh dill, fragrant tarragon, ginger and bright lemon turn the spring's harvest of bok choy, mizuna, escarole, and chard into a whole hugely greater than the sum of its parts. This is a bowl that "opens the emerald doorway to the limitless possibilities of spring." And across the book's spine, a poem by Massimilla opens its own doorways: "Love is love/ of nothing but *from* to the base of the mountain/ where oil and cheeses cool in caves shaded/ by cypresses."

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Cooks and poets know love is an indispensable ingredient. Kornfeld and Massimilla are a couple, and their love for the food they make and the literature and history they delve into is infectious. Kornfeld is a chef, educator and the author of three previous cookbooks, including *The Healthy Hedonist*. That title encompasses that rare combination of sincerity and unabashed pleasure she channels. We're going to feast, but it's going to be on only the very best. In *Cooking with the Muse*, wholesomeness and lust not only coexist, but uplift each other.

Massimilla, a poet, critic, professor, and painter, is scary brilliant. The abundant references to literary heavyweights and historical lore may have felt intimidating if not for the way they are delivered—with light-heartedness, warmth, and passion. Like sharing a bowl of I-Sold-My-Birthright Lentil Soup or a generous slice of Someone-Who-Loves-You Rhubarb-Strawberry Crumble Pie, chewing on the history of the summer squash, unpacking a Wallace Stevens poem about pears, and following the tale of Siddhartha Gautama reaching enlightenment beneath a wild Sacred Fig tree all feels a memorable and extraordinary treat.

We have been invited into this surreal world where all words are pregnant with meaning and feeling, where everything tastes wonderful. It's a magical place to be. I want to stick around.

Like the fanciful and fabulous sonnets and odes by Massimilla and others in this book, this is food rooted in tradition with a totally modern sensibility—food I am excited to cook because it is all pure poetry. Yam Waffles with Maple-Pecan Butter beside an essay on the poetry of yams. Chicken Cutlets crusted with coconut and almond. Spring Pea and Fava Bean Risotto juxtaposed with poems about peas and fava beans. Chocolate Fudgy Nibby Brownies and “A Dithyramb to Chocolate.” Turkish Lamb Stew so fragrant, my head gets spinny.

As a cook and writer myself, I experienced *Cooking with the Muse* as a special sort of revelation. Marvelous meals become great stories— real food, honest words, make every aspect of life better. They are how we celebrate ourselves, each other, and the world that we call home. They are how we give and receive love and nourishment, what the Sufi poet Hafiz calls “the pleasure/of such an open-hearted garden.” Taken together, they are the best part of our humanity. Here is a smorgasbord of powerful poems, stories, and memories so delicious, I can taste them.

Kornfeld and Massimilla feed so much more than our bellies.

I'm hungry. I'm in.

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Hannah Howard is a writer and food expert who spent her formative years in New York eating, drinking, serving, bartending, cooking on a hot line, flipping

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