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Under the Spell of Silken Tofu

How Mollie Katzen's Cooking
Enchanted a Whole Generation

by Emily Bazelon

The back cover of my copy of the *Moosewood Cookbook* came off the other day. The masking tape I used to patch it is in keeping with the rest of the book, which is dog-eared and food-speckled. There's a small piece of onion stuck to page 13, next to a recipe for curried squash and mushroom soup, and what could be a footprint atop the instructions for Mexican corn and chili bread. The book belongs to my husband, so I can't trace the history of every grease stain and tomato sauce dribble. But their origins are familiar.

Paul and I lived on this same sycamore-lined block during college, part of an off-campus neighborhood of backpackers and recyclers. Six or seven groups of students moved into houses along the street, ready to turn down the heat, dig compost piles, and quit eating meat. I shared a sprawling five-bedroom house with four other women. We had big plans to live and eat cheaply, healthily, and well. The only problem was that we'd grown up on dinners of hamburgers and broiled chicken, and while they had no place on the picnic table that graced our dining room, we weren't sure how to make whatever would take their place.

The *Moosewood Cookbook*—a new sequel is due out this fall—took over where our know-how left off. We relied on the recipes' earnest, step-by-step instructions (they never assume that you know to soak beans before cooking them) and enjoyed the accompanying whimsical illustrations. When a bunch of neighbors got together to place an order with a local food co-op, my house bought a 15-pound bucket of tahini and burlap bags filled with lentils and chickpeas. With the *Moosewood* as our guide we turned the tahini and chickpeas into quarts of hummus and the lentils into steaming pots of soup. And once I gained the skill to elaborate a little, playing with the recipes—"Oh, I think I'll just throw in some kale"—made me feel like I actually knew what I was doing.

The *Moosewood* helped save me and my friends from starvation. But, along with cookbook writer Mollie Katzen's later books, it did more than that. The recipes helped us locate





ourselves in the world. They are cultural touchstones for a loose network of crunchy-granola 20- and 30-somethings. They followed me to my first holiday meal in Jerusalem (orange, cashew, and sweet potato pie in a spinach crust) and continue to guide me through the paradise of fruit-and-vegetable-rich California cooking. When I see one of the books on a friend's kitchen shelf, I feel like I'm at home.

The haphazard nature of her own cooking led Katzen to the innovation that's at the center of her new cookbook. *Mollie Katzen's Vegetable Heaven*, due out in October with a companion public-television show, does not have a chapter for entrees and another for side dishes. Instead, Katzen decided to scuttle the hunk-of-something-in-the-center-of-the-plate tradition in favor of "side-by-side dishes" that readers can mix and match. "I'd come up with a good broccoli stir-fry and a lentil puree and then get worried about what the main dish was," she says. "But then I realized 'Hey, that's what I like to eat for dinner,'" she says.

The *Moosewood* turns 20 this year. When it came out, Katzen was the same age I am now. Still, she's surprised by the book's generation-spanning appeal since she wrote it primarily for her friends' moms. "At the time a lot of mothers were suspicious about vegetarian food, because they thought it lacked protein and also richness," said Katzen, 46, as she sipped a fruit juice outside the Berkeley Bakery Cafe. "I wanted to calm them down by proving that vegetarian cook-

ing could be opulent and rich and very, very good."

Katzen's own mother kept a basically kosher home in Rochester, N.Y. "Meat and milk were separate, and we never ate pork or shellfish, though my mother didn't buy kosher meat. She'd throw something over the steaks to cover them when she ran into the *rebbetzin* at the market," Katzen remembers.

The family ate dinners of flank steaks, Minute Rice, and the occasional frozen vegetable. When she was 12, Katzen encountered fresh green beans at a friend's country home. "I was absolutely transfixed," she says, her smile widening. "I developed a very serious interest in vegetables during middle school."

Katzen says she began jotting down some of the recipes in the *Moosewood* while learning to cook at a now-defunct San Francisco restaurant called Shandygaff. It was 1970, and aside from die-hard macrobiotics, not many people knew how to cook vegetarian. Katzen was getting a degree in painting at the San Francisco Art Institute, and when she heard a Shandygaff radio ad trumpeting cutting-edge California cuisine, she took a bus straight from the studio and asked them to hire her.

From Shandygaff, Katzen went to the Moosewood Restaurant in Ithaca, N.Y. Several chefs had taken over part of a former elementary school, founded a restaurant collective, and cooked free-form without a set menu. Katzen helped

chronicle the recipes in the journals she'd brought from San Francisco. Still interested in a career in painting, she often added drawings to explain an instruction or evoke a favorite vegetable. Hand-lettered and illustrated, the original compilation passed quickly among customers' kitchens.

The *Moosewood* wasn't the first major meatless cookbook, but it didn't preach—the word vegetarian doesn't even appear in the first edition—and read like what it was: a low-key guide for a bunch of friends. "That's why the book is so informal," Katzen says. "If I'd known other people were going to use it, I probably would have been a lot more self-conscious." In 1977, a small Berkeley press quietly published it.

It's the perfect story for the making of a homey classic, and the *Moosewood*, together with Katzen's three other books, has sold three and a half million copies. But the story also has a controversial wrinkle: other cooks at the Ithaca restaurant said that Katzen had taken credit for a collaborative project. The fight led to litigation, which was settled out of court.

Katzen left the restaurant, which was later sold, and came back to the Bay Area in the early 1980s. She hasn't cooked professionally since, though she says that preparing food for others doesn't make her nervous. "Naahh," she says "I enjoy it." But she's not a big entertainer. "What happens a lot is that I'll be testing a new recipe—like recently I was working on a grapefruit curd tart, which is really hard to get right because the grapefruit tend to get weepy and then the crust goes soft—and I'll have six of that and nothing else in the kitchen for dinner."

Katzen's "course-less" approach in the new book follows naturally from her earlier effort to lighten up the dairy-heavy original *Moosewood* recipes. Katzen revised the book five years ago to satisfy the fat- and oil-conscious (though many of us had already figured out that six servings of Swiss cheese and onion soup don't really require five tablespoons of butter). In the new book, cutting time, as well as fat, is of the essence.

"In the 1970s no one cared about fat or fiber content, or about the time it took to cook some of these things," Katzen says. "The first *Moosewood* even has a recipe for homemade egg rolls." Now the challenge is to keep the ingredient list simple and preparation time under half an hour. "It's easy to come up with a fantastic recipe based on rosemary-infused olive oil and the perfect tomato," Katzen says, giving me hunger pangs. "But that's not the point, because my readers often can't shop in the fancy stores they might like to, and the bottom line is that they need dinner!"

Katzen's own family keeps her experimenting. I gushed when I discovered her son Sam among my bar-mitzvah students, but this mature Berkeley 12-year-old shrugged me off like a natural. "Yeah, people are always saying how my mom

is this great vegetarian chef," he said. "It's kind of funny since all I like to eat is hamburgers and hotdogs."

Along with Sam-the-hamburger-lover ("Actually, he does like tofu with peanut sauce," his mother insists), five-and-a-half-year-old Eve has a taste for sugar, not vegetables. "Good food just doesn't hold her attention, doesn't call her name," Katzen says of her daughter. She shakes her head and pauses between words to emphasize the unthinkable. "She skips meals." Other frustrated moms may relish knowing that Chinese food is the only dinner Katzen, her husband Carl, Sam, and Eve all like to share.

Katzen herself isn't a strict vegetarian, though she sticks to fish and free-range chicken. While her recipes include a wide range of ethnic influences, she credits her mother's Jewish cooking as a kind of indirect inspiration. One of her books, *Still Life with Menu*, offers up a vegetarian seder. When I mention a mushroom casserole that's a particular favorite, Katzen says the dish she grew up eating was made from Campbell's cream of mushroom soup and cornstarch. "I use my mother's cooking," Katzen says. "I just try to figure out how to make it taste good with my kind of ingredients."

The night before I talked to Katzen, I went out for Ethiopian food with two of my college housemates and asked them about learning to cook. "Page 91!" Mandy said right away. "That's my page in the *Moosewood*. It's the recipe for hummus." Chani claimed page five, a sweet-potato and chick-pea-based brew called Gypsy Soup. I couldn't pin myself down to one recipe, though in college I think I mostly stuck to lentils. We agreed that we still turn to the *Moosewood* when we want a kugel to bring to a potluck, or a pot of soup simmering on the stove on a cold day.

This is true even though the food isn't what our mothers cooked us—I don't remember mine ever serving beans for dinner. In fact, my mom once fit well into the original audience of suspicious elders that Katzen hoped to woo. I've since given her one of Katzen's books, and she's become a fan (though she sometimes has to add meat to the recipes for my dad).

As for my own generation, my friends and I are no longer strict vegetarians, but we're still trying to eat cheaply and healthily and well. Katzen's glad to help us through her books. "I care very much about trying to influence people, especially young women, to have a constructive, powerful, self-nurturing, sensual relationship with food," she says as she drains the last of her fruit juice. "My books try to convey that cooking good food can be a source of incredible stability. That's not a trivial thing to me at all."

At 12,
Katzen
discovered
fresh green
beans at a
friend's
home.
"I was
transfixed."

Emily Bazelon is a freelance writer in Berkeley, Calif. Her favorite Moosewood recipe is Cascadilla Soup.