

A New Way to Cook by Sally Schneider. Artisan, 2001. 739 p., \$40.

I am a hard sell on low-fat cooking, even at the beginning of the new year. Frankly, what is the point of living a long, miserable life?

But award-winning cookbook author and journalist Sally Schneider was saying all the right things. In *A New Way to Cook*, she promises not to ignore the pleasure principle and deliver all the rich flavors I crave in a way that I won't miss the extra fat grams. Normally, I would treat such claims the same way I would a politician's in an election year, but she starts her book with a defense of fat and includes recipes for duck confit and macaroni and cheese. Indeed, "flavorful fat"—which includes rendered goose or bacon fat—is perhaps the most repeated phrase in the book.

As a cook, Schneider demonstrates a thorough grounding in classic Mediterranean cooking with Latino, North African, and Asian accents thrown into her culinary lexicon. She uses every trick possible to develop flavor, and she has spent ten years developing strategies to get the most bang out of every gram of fat. (Some of her work on this book appeared in her column for *Food and Wine Magazine*.) In pasta sauces, she extends the fat by rapidly boiling it with liquid to create a creamy emulsion. Hot potatoes are sponges, so she makes potato salad by coating warm potatoes first with broth or other low-fat flavoring and adds oil only after the potatoes have cooled and become less absorbent. Chestnut puree is an innovative substitute for pork fat in her smooth chicken liver pate, which has Armagnac and golden raisins for interest. Her mantra is that any food is fine as long as it is top quality and eaten in moderate quantities.

The proof, of course, is in the pudding. My week of cooking the new Schneider way was surprisingly painless, even enlightening. The skin of the Foolproof Roast Chicken crackled even without a coating of melted butter, and the lemon sealed in the cavity perfumed the meat and the sauce. My orthodox Southern genes rebelled at the idea of precooking BBQ baby back ribs, but I admit that sealing the slabs individually in foil for the first 1 ½ hours locked in the juices and the punchy Asian-inspired marinade. The result was succulent meat under a deep mahogany crust that went perfectly with the creamy, mayonnaise-free Classic Coleslaw. I generally dislike coleslaw, but parsley gave her version a refreshing bite, while horseradish and a dash of hot sauce provided a pleasing heat.

While I found her seasoning suggestions to be generally on the mark, if not downright inspired, cooking times and temperatures were an area of dispute. Lower fat foods tend to dry out if overcooked, but at 140 degrees internal temperature, the Chicken Liver Pate was not quite set and disturbingly red. I like my steaks bloody, but I prefer not to eat rare ground meat, which is what you get if you cook the Meat Loaf with Wild Mushrooms to the suggested 150 degrees. Cooked a little longer, the meatloaf was a hit.

One unforeseen problem was that this lower fat food was good enough to make us want to eat more than our allotted portion amounts. Schneider's theory is that a little excellent roast duck is more satisfying than a lot of boring diet food, but I found that a little excellent roast duck simply leaves you wanting more. It would be a good idea to serve plenty of her attractive vegetable side dishes. Also, the quality of the ingredients really matters. You will not get away with using dried Parmesan or inferior olive oil.

Desserts are the swimsuit competition of low-fat cooking. Pastry dough is unforgiving of innovation, but Schneider manages to cut the amount of butter in half for

her Flaky Butter Pastry and still come out with respectable results. The secret is sour cream and chilling the food processor bowl. With less butter, however, the flour can come out tasting raw. The crust should be baked until golden. Her gelatin-set lemon curd tart will not make me throw out Gerard Mulot's superb recipe, but at only 212 calories per serving, it was a perfectly honorable compromise. I did feel slightly cheated by the cornstarch-thickened Chocolate Malted Pudding, made without eggs and with low fat (1%) milk, perhaps because the recipe omitted the espresso mentioned in the headnote. The malt powder does add creaminess to compensate for the lack of dairy, but the flabby cornstarch texture is unmistakable.

Schneider's new way of cooking eliminates fat wherever it is easy to do so, extending the flavor as much as possible, but she will leave it in when necessary. This approach makes sense for those who want to eat both well and conscientiously, but it may not go far enough for those who need more drastic measures. For example, compared to a classic recipe, her Coriander-and-Orange-Scented Scones merely eliminated an egg and substituted buttermilk for milk; the amount of butter was virtually unchanged.

But the greatest strength, as well as weakness, of the book was not so much a new way of cooking but a new way of writing recipes. Rather than calling for specific ingredients, Schneider often gives templates of master techniques with suggestions for improvisation. Her recipe for Roasted Vegetables, for example, calls for "3 ½ pounds vegetables, trimmed and peeled if appropriate, 1 tablespoon flavorful fat such as extra-virgin olive oil, Flavored Oil, melted unsalted butter, or rendered bacon, pancetta, or goose fat, kosher salt and freshly ground pepper." This approach has the virtue both of teaching a man to fish and letting him choose between olive oil and goose fat. The downside is a very cumbersome, dense book with uninspiring recipe names like "Saucing Pasta With Broths and Vegetable Juices." Rarely have I learned so much from a single cookbook, but a number of techniques as well as smaller recipes were buried in long introductions and headnotes. To get the greatest benefit from the book, it must be read and studied like a biology textbook. It is hard to flip through and pick out a single recipe to try since Schneider is presenting a whole system of cooking. Fortunately, the results taste a lot better than my old science experiments did.

Wild mushrooms lighten the texture (and calorie count) of this meat loaf while deepening the rich, meaty flavors. The sprinkling of Parmigiano really pays off, while the powdered Lapsang Souchong added a mysterious, smoky note. Forming the loaf on a sheet pan was a little tricky, but the meat loaf does not stew in its fatty juices as it would in a loaf pan. To make molding easier, you could pack the mixture in a plastic wrap-lined loaf pan and unmold it onto the baking sheet. The Ancho Chili Ketchup was not part of the recipe, but I found it mentioned in the headnote.

Meat Loaf with Wild Mushrooms

½ cup (2/3 oz.) dried porcini mushrooms

½ cup hot water

12 oz. fresh wild mushrooms, such as shiitake, cremini, oyster, and/or portobello, in any combination

2 teaspoons olive oil

3 medium onions, finely chopped
1 tablespoon minced garlic
½ cup dry white wine
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1 teaspoon finely ground Lapsang Souchong tea, optional
5 slices (about 4 ¾ oz.) white sandwich bread, crusts removed, and torn into large pieces
1/3 cup nonfat milk
3 large egg whites
1 ½ lbs. lean ground beef
12 oz. lean ground pork
3 tablespoons freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
2 to 3 teaspoons kosher salt
1 ½ teaspoons freshly ground black pepper

Ancho Chile Ketchup

1-2 teaspoons pure ancho chile powder or ground, roasted ancho chile
½ cup tomato ketchup

Place the dried mushrooms in a small bowl and cover with the hot water. Set aside to soak for 25 minutes.

Rinse the fresh mushrooms in cold water and drain. Remove and discard the tough stems. If you are using portobellos, remove the black gills with a paring knife. Coarsely chop the mushrooms by hand or in a food processor, pulsing it on and off.

With a slotted spoon, scoop the dried mushrooms out of their liquid; rinse them under cold water to remove any grit. Finely chop them; reserve the liquid.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F.

In a large, heavy skillet, combine the olive oil and onions, cover, and cook over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until the onions have released their liquid, about 7 minutes.

Stir in the garlic and cook for 1 minute longer. Add the fresh and dried mushrooms, cover, and cook until the fresh mushrooms have wilted and released some liquid.

Uncover, increase the heat slightly, and cook, stirring frequently, until all the liquid has evaporated and the vegetables are nicely caramelized, about 15 minutes.

Stir in the wine, tomato paste, the tea powder, if using, and the mushroom liquid, taking care to leave any sediment behind. Simmer until the liquid has completely evaporated, about 8 minutes. Set aside to cool for 5 minutes.

In a large bowl, combine the bread and milk and, using a fork, mash together to make a paste. Stir in the egg whites. Add the beef, pork, and cheese, using a wooden spoon or your hands to blend them thoroughly. Stir in the mushroom mixture, salt, and pepper. Scoop the mixture onto the center of a large nonstick baking pan. Shape into a loaf about 10 by 5 inches.

Bake the meat loaf for 25 minutes. Increase the oven temperature to 400 degrees F and bake for about 30 minutes longer, or until a meat thermometer inserted in the center reads 150 degrees F. [I would suggest 165 degrees.]

Let the meat loaf cool slightly, and blot up the fat in the pan with paper towels before slicing.

To make the ancho ketchup, combine the ancho powder and ketchup in a small bowl. Let stand for 15 minutes to develop the flavors.

The meat loaf can be refrigerated, well wrapped, for up to 5 days. Serves 8.

Review Summary:

Pros: Innovative, imaginative recipes cut fat without sacrificing pleasure. No tasty food is left out. Well-tested yet open-ended recipes turn out clear, complex flavors while minimizing fuss and encouraging improvisation. Interesting use of a wide variety of ingredients and seasonings, packed with useful cooking techniques and information.

Cons: Wordy, sometimes repetitive style sometimes buries useful information in prose. The size and design of the book make it seem inaccessible, and light-colored fonts are hard to read.