

The Elements of Taste by Gray Kunz and Peter Kaminsky. Little, Brown, 2001. 261 p., \$40.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the great French gastronome Brillat-Savarin observed that little had been done in the way of a scientific analysis of taste. There are too many tastes, he said, and classifying them would require a whole new language. Until then, we would just have to use generalizations like sweet, salty and sour to describe taste.

Nearly two hundred years later, Gray Kunz, former chef of Lespinasse, and Peter Kaminsky claim to have developed the long-awaited periodic table of tastes. In *The Elements of Taste*, they proclaim that there are 14 basic tastes in the modern culinary palette: salty, sweet, picante (hot), tangy, vinted, bulby, floral herbal, spiced aromatic, funky, garden, meaty, oceanic, starchy, and sharp bitter. These they classify further as tastes that pull, push, punctuate, and serve as platforms. Armed with this new vocabulary, food writers can break down dishes into their component tastes and sound just like wine writers.

The cookbook that follows the lengthy introduction puts theory into action. Rather than the conventional appetizer, main course, and dessert chapters, the recipes are organized by the tastes they are supposed to demonstrate. Each recipe comes with detailed tasting notes in the new lingo.

What follows is a comparison of their tasting notes with mine.

Pan-Seared Scallops in a White Wine Broth with Butternut Squash

What They Got: “The floral note of honey sounds first. The vinted element from the wine pulls flavor forward as does the lemon tang. The squash gives crunch and roundness, which brings out the roundness in the scallop. A light heat and salt, with faint oceanic tones and sweetness, finish off the taste.”

What I Got: This dish looks beautiful and tastes like flowers floating on the sea. Very brief cooking keeps flavors bright and clear, and the dish comes together very quickly. Lemon and honey balance each other nicely and seem to bring out the sweetness of the scallops, almost to the point of becoming unnaturally flowery for seafood. The broth is very representative of the rapid, highly aromatic broths used in this book in place of long-simmered stocks. (See sole recipe below.) Good bang for little effort.

Herbed Rabbit Stew with Artichokes and Tomatoes

What They Got: “The floral herbal of the rosemary and thyme accents the salt and meat. Garlic opens the bouquet and brings out the meatiness of the rabbit. The acid lemon and tomato tang pull and brighten the meatiness, while artichokes defuse and soften the strong tastes. After each bite, the herbs come on again. The last note is picante heat.”

What I Got: A huge kiss from my rabbit-loving husband. After a few tentative bites, my little sister said, “I think I like rabbit” and I forgot all about the hours I spent prepping 16 artichokes and the myriad other vegetables. This recipe is really three dishes in one, so the play of tastes is unusually rich and complex. The legs are slowly braised in tomato and huge handfuls of herbs until they are tender and succulent, while the artichokes bask in their own aromatic stew of herbs and root vegetables. The saddle loins were diced and quickly seared, adding a contrasting “top note” of rabbit flavor. Tender, savory, and ever so slightly gamey, it was everything rabbit should be.

Confit of Veal Breast with Bulby Vegetables

What They Got: “This is a multi-layered yet smooth-tasting dish. The white pepper hits the nose first, followed by wave after wave of bulby vegetables. The cabbage blends in with the bulby vegetables lending a note of sweet funkiness. Its aroma focuses the other tastes. The veal is first experienced as intense meaty bouquet. As you bite into it, its texture comes forward and highlights the apple sweetness, vinted wine tang, and again the sugary, bulby bouquet of cooked onions and leeks.”

What I Got: Barely enough veal to serve three people, let alone four. The meat, smothered in a blanket of leeks, onions, and winter vegetables, was as rich and smooth-tasting as promised, but the vegetables were not. The whole white peppercorns hit the teeth first, followed by unpleasant papery skins from the unpeeled garlic and stringy leek fibers. In the end, we scraped off the mushy vegetable matter and ate the veal. I made the further mistake of serving the “Ginger and Kale with Bell Peppers” alongside—the punchy, salty bitterness of the kale was good in itself, but it did not complement the oniony (bulby?) veal at all. My fatal error was that I did not notice the recipe called for soy sauce until it was too late. If this cookbook is supposed to teach us to combine tastes like a master chef, I have a long way to go. The assertive flavors of the dishes in this book, not to mention their labor-intensiveness, make combining them difficult unless one has mastered the elements of taste.

Sausage with Lager Sauce and Apple Bouillon

What They Got: “The strong meatiness from the sausage gives off a full aroma that is pulled up by the bulbiness of the onion. The lightly bitter note from the beer cuts the meaty heaviness. The sweetness and tang of the bouillon balance the bitterness of the beer.”

What I Got: A frustrating mess. As usual, the broth is bright and aromatic, although it was far more trouble to strain the ground cloves and cinnamon through a coffee filter than it would have been to steep it longer with whole spices. On my first attempt, the onions and residual sugars from the beer scorched before the sausages browned, and by the time the flour went in, they were burned beyond recognition. I started over with fresh onions and flour, but this time the onion-lager mixture never visibly thickened, even after ten minutes. The result tasted like a tailgate accident, sausages and beer sloshing in apple juice.

Okra-Bell Pepper Ratatouille With Mung Bean Curry Crepe

What They Got: “The bell peppers strike a bright garden note, assisted by the cumin and nutmeg. Coriander leaves and parsley are a light floral herbal counterpoint to the aromatic spices. Finally, the bean crepe coats the palate, setting the stage for floral herbal, spiced aromatic, and garden tastes, softened by a hint of caramelized sweetness.”

What I Got: Much the same, I think. This vegetarian dish is fresh and bright, a good thing to make when red bell peppers are in season. The pale green, exotically spicy mung bean crepes turned out more like pancakes, and in addition to my husband mistaking the white rice scattered in it for maggots, they gave the dish substance and interest. Personally, I would have spared myself the fussiness of removing the okra seeds and simply sliced it into rounds as if for gumbo. Without the crunch of the seeds, okra is just slime.

Sole in Crisped Couscous, With Watercress, Ginger, and Asparagus Broth

Broth:

2 tablespoons butter
1 medium onion, thinly sliced
½ cup roughly chopped, peeled ginger
1 dozen large asparagus, stalks halved
¾ lb. watercress plus ½ cup leaves reserved for garnish
4 cups chicken stock
Kosher salt
1 teaspoon sugar
Cayenne pepper to taste

Melt the butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the onions and ginger and cook until the onions are translucent. Add the asparagus bottoms (save the tops for garnish—see below), the ¾ lb. of watercress, and water or stock. Season with salt and sugar and bring to a simmer. Cook for 20 minutes. Strain the broth through a fine sieve, season with salt, sugar, and cayenne and keep warm over very low heat.

Sole:

4 6-oz. fillets of lemon sole or flounder
½ cup quick-cooking couscous
2 tablespoons grapeseed or other neutral vegetable oil
1 tablespoon butter
Kosher salt
Freshly ground white pepper

Preheat the oven to 300 degrees. Trim the fillets so that you have 2 straight edges (the fillets will taper toward the tail). [The authors fail to mention seasoning in the instructions. I suggest seasoning the fillets with salt and pepper at this point.] Roll each fillet proceeding from the thicker end to the thinner and secure with a toothpick. Dip one end of each roll in couscous.

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the fish, crust side down, and cook until golden, about 3 minutes. Turn the fish, cooking briefly on remaining sides, then transfer the fish to the oven to finish cooking, another 3 minutes. [The butter listed in the ingredient list is left out of the instructions. I crumbled it on top of the fillets before putting them in the oven.]

Topping:

Asparagus tops (see above)
15 small shrimp
2 tablespoons grapeseed or other neutral oil
¼ cup sliced, peeled ginger
1 shallot, finely chopped
Kosher salt
Freshly ground white pepper

Snip off the asparagus florets and set aside. Slice the stems into ½-inch lengths. Blanch both the florets and asparagus lengths in boiling salted water, shock in ice water, then drain.

Heat the oil in a skillet over high flame. Toss in the shrimp and ginger. After 1 minute, add the shallots and asparagus. Cook until the shrimp is pink, about 1 minute more.

Plating:

Divide the wilted watercress among four soup plates. [I assume that they are referring to the ½ cup watercress leaves reserved for garnish, maybe wilted briefly in a skillet or in the hot broth.] Place a rolled fillet in each. Spoon the topping over the fish and surround with broth and serve. Serves 4.

What They Got: “The tastes start with two clear aromas: a touch of floral sweetness in the ginger and sweet bulbiness from the shallots and onions. This bouquet pulls up the ocean taste from the shrimp and fish. The grit of the couscous and the light crunch of the asparagus punctuate. There’s a sharp, slightly picante edge to the watercress, and light heat from the ginger.”

What I Got: Perfectly cooked if lopsided medallions of delicate sole, the couscous top crust satisfyingly golden and crunchy even after a few minutes in the aromatic broth. Even after trimming, the fillets were taller than they were wide and tended to flop over on their sides. On the second pass, I halved the fillets lengthwise and made two rolls of each and got on better. The flavors of this dish are so ethereally light that the chicken broth seems rich and earthy by comparison, anchoring it. Despite the large amount of ginger in the recipe, the flavor is not overwhelming and admirably balanced. Once again, it is difficult to figure out where this dish fits in a home-cooked menu. It is rather insubstantial as a main course for four, but it does not welcome side dishes and is too large and labor-intensive to be a mere appetizer. It could be a fancy lunch.

Review Summary:

Pros: Interesting, often refreshing recipes by a European chef who knows the difference between fusion and confusion. Innovative and masterful manipulation of flavors demonstrate how chefs create a new dish. The classification system of tastes certainly is food for thought, and it may help diners understand what they are eating.

Cons: It is sometimes difficult to tell whether a dish is a main course, appetizer, or side dish. The recipes tend to be labor intensive and hard to combine in a cohesive menu. Also, it is not clear that we need to start talking about food in the sometimes pretentious way people discuss wines, pinky lifted in the air. After all, Brillat-Savarin describes students of taste as assuming “without even realizing it a proper stance for the pronouncement of their verdicts, always with necks stretched and noses twisted up and to the left, as it were to larboard.”