Books

Eastern Standard

Asian Tofu
by Andrea Nguyen, 232 pages,
Ten Speed Press, hardcover, $30 (2012).

Ariana Lindquist

Andrea Nguyen

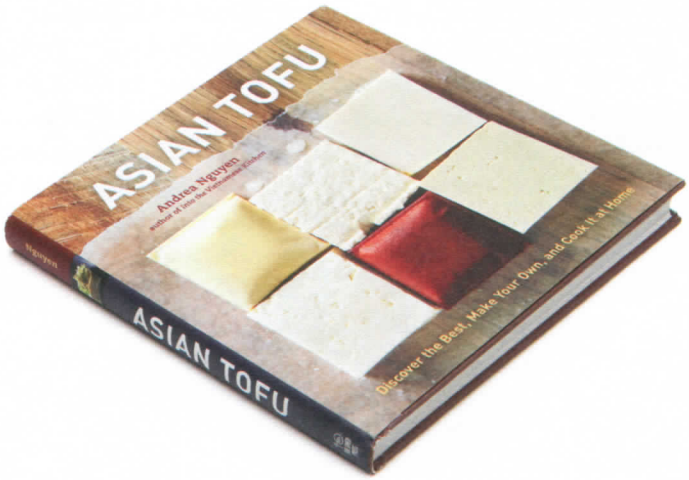
Tofu has long been misunderstood and underappreciated in the West — it's the protein of restricted diets and alternative lifestyles, a stand-in for meat. The general approach is to disguise it as something else (tofu scramble) or overwhelm it (barbecue sauce). But when Andrea Nguyen, the Vietnamese-American author of *Asian Tofu,* was growing up, just as for me, a Taiwanese-American, tofu was often the main event. It had equal standing with fish or pork and sometimes showed up in the same dishes with them. So much Asian cooking relies on the remarkable diversity in type and uses of tofu and highlights its flavors, and yet incredibly, Nguyen's is among a very few cookbooks that put "tofu in its original context, as an important Asian staple that people have made, cooked, and enjoyed for centuries." Informative, engaging, well written and researched, this is also the best book about tofu.

A careful reader will be generously rewarded with smart observations and practical advice. After a brief history of tofu, Nguyen provides a lucid orientation in her "Tofu Buying Guide." She says, "In general, the firmer the tofu, the harder the texture, and the more protein it contains by weight," however, "these categories of [block] tofu" — silken, medium, firm — "are like clothing sizes. While there are industry definitions for tofu densities and textures, manufacturers have latitude within each one." Other useful nuggets of wisdom: "Japanese-style tofu is softer than other kinds"; nonrefrigerated "boxed tofu is only useful in an emergency"; "medium or medium-firm is great for dishes that require little manipulation," while super-firm "grates well." For block tofu as well as pressed tofu, tofu noodles, tofu skin, fried tofu, tofu pudding, and fermented tofu, Nguyen explains not just how to identify varieties and freshness, but also what kind of packaging to look for (especially useful in the often-bewildering Asian grocery), how to store them, and for how long. The section of "Tofu Cooking Tips" describes techniques employed throughout the book and offers further useful hints. For draining tofu, which helps it absorb seasonings, "A waffle-weave dishtowel works extra well because it raises the tofu up slightly so it doesn't sit on an overly damp surface." And blanching tofu firms it up and helps it "better withstand vigorous simmering." Even the most seasoned cook will find something useful in these introductory sections.

But novice cooks, take heart. This book is for all levels of interest and ambition. The uninitiated can dive right in with Miso-Glazed Broiled Tofu, in which squares of firm tofu are spread with two easy-to-make sauces and blasted with heat for a few minutes until bubbling. The Japanese Chilled Tofu requires no cooking at all — just supremely fresh, chilled silken tofu with the simplest embellishment of sliced scallion, grated ginger, and soy sauce.

Aficionados know that the best tofu is the freshest (except for fermented and maybe a few others), and nothing is fresher than the stuff you make yourself. For the cook who likes a more involved project, the first few recipes guide you through the process, from making your own soy milk to the differentiating steps for silken, extra-firm, or soft, custardy pudding. It's very similar to cheesemaking: once the soy milk is extracted, it's heated, a coagulant is added, curds form, and the mass is drained and pressed.

I had always wanted to make my



own and just never had the nerve, but Nguyen's meticulous, reassuring instructions led me to success on the first try. She provides clear tables that detail water quantities required for rich, medium, and light soy milk, for the stages of tofu making, and for which milks are suitable for which types of tofu. She also explains the difference between coagulants. I used liquid *nigari* (magnesium chloride, extracted from seawater) because it was the first I found, but next time I may try gypsum (calcium sulfate), which "yields mild-tasting tofu that is slightly more tender." Epsom salts (magnesium sulfates) can also be used, but they give a grainy texture. Nguyen even anticipated the problem I had with incomplete coagulation. Her suggestion to reheat the milk-coagulant mixture slightly and wait longer worked perfectly.

Making my own tofu was messy and time-intensive, and mine wasn't superior to the excellent, extremely fresh tofu I can find easily in my city, so I'm in no hurry to make it again. But fresh soy milk is very much worth the few easy steps required, and the "delicious serendipity" of tofu skin that naturally forms in the process is reason alone to make it. Nguyen writes, "Freshly prepared tofu skin is heavenly, with a silky texture and super delicate flavor." I agree completely. It's "a truly rare and artisanal food," one you can find only in a tofu shop or make yourself.

The rest of the recipes are divided by course. I ate that fresh tofu skin simply cooled, without adornment, but one recipe suggests serving it as you would sashimi, with wasabi and soy sauce. This and many of my favorites appear in "Snacks and Starters." From the "Main Dishes" chapter, I made Batter-Fried Tofu with Chile Soy Sauce, a recipe that enveloped my fresh tofu in a delicate, airily crisp shell, which I plan to use with many other foods. There are also "Soups and Hot Pots," "Salads and Sides," and even the self-explanatory "Mock Meats," a much-loved use of tofu, popularized by Buddhists, that has "been elevated to an art form" in Asia. And while vegans and vegetarians may find plenty to like in *Asian Tofu,* meat and fish work well with tofu, as demonstrated in recipes such as Spicy Tofu with Beef and Sichuan Peppercorn; Bitter Melon with Tofu and Pork; Tofu with Kimchi and Pork Belly; and Stir-Fried Tofu, Shrimp, and Peas. To complement the largely traditional fare, Nguyen has also collected a few modern recipes in "Buns, Dumplings, Crepes, Noodles, and Rice" and "Sweets and Desserts." In all, there are nearly 100 recipes.

This excellent book "does not aim to convert, but rather to present tofu traditions as they exist and as they continue to deliciously develop." Nguyen has accomplished her goal admirably. *Asian Tofu* is an invaluable resource, essential for anyone who is curious about tofu, loves it, or loves Asian food.

— *Winnie Yang*

Down on the Farm

Japanese Farm Food by Nancy Singleton Hachisu, 386 pages, Andrews McMeel, hardcover, $35 (2012).

When I was growing up in rural Minnesota in the 70s, it was a challenge for my Japanese mother to find the ingredients of her native cuisine. Yet somehow she managed, and my classmates were puzzled by my brown-bag lunch of *omusubi* (stuffed rice balls) and Japanese pickles. All that has changed. Her local supermarket now sells frozen edamame and nori and take-away sushi. Japanese food is no longer foreign. But as popular as it is around the world, there has been a dearth of recipes in English. Recently some specialty cookbooks have begun to fill the gap, including Tadashi Ono and Harris Salat's books on grilling and hot pots and *Kansha*, Elizabeth Andoh's tome on vegetarian cuisine. At the other end of the spectrum is *Japanese Farm Food,* filled with home-style recipes and basic techniques that will enable novices to gain confidence in the Japanese kitchen.

Californian Nancy Singleton Hachisu runs an English-language immersion school north of Tokyo. Her husband, Tadaaki, is an organic egg farmer. Her book is a memoir-with-recipes that documents her life as she and her husband raise three boys on his family's farm with the farm's matriarch, her mother-in-law. The book with its approachable writing often reads like a diary: "Tadaaki tends to whoosh in, give a few minimal cooking commands, and then spin back off to the eggs, chickens, or deliveries. I am the opposite, completely controlling in the kitchen and not one to let people go willy-nilly." She describes her experience as a "stubbornly independent foreign bride" and how she defined her role on the farm. After two decades of shirking certain duties, "I knew it was time for me to start assuming more of the traditional Japanese wife's (*oyome*) tasks, such as pickle making."

The farm is a gathering place for people who come for nourishment and the convivial atmosphere, an experience we share through the photos of Kenji Miura. He exquisitely captures such details as the rich textures of freshly shaved *katsuobushi* (smoked skipjack tuna) or the sticky threads of *natto* (fermented soybeans).

Japanese Farm Food shines in its abundance of recipes made from a