

Get Out of (Guilt) Jail Free

THE NEW ISSUE of my foodie magazine was open in front of me. I had just stabbed a perfect square of eggy French toast, dusted with cinnamon and almost dripping warmed maple syrup onto the bacon on my plate. I had the fork halfway to my mouth when I saw it, a bold-faced headline: What You Should Eat This Year. I knew my breakfast wouldn't make the Top 10 list. In the words of Maureen Dowd, I suffered pre-traumatic stress syndrome. What would these prognosticators think of me? Surely, I'd have demerits in their big ledger.

I pushed the magazine away, determined to enjoy this glorious food on the first day of this bright new year. It wasn't until I was on my second cup of very good French press coffee that I again opened the magazine.

Like taking too many antibiotics, had we developed an immunity to kale? Where was it? Seemingly, this super food of 2016 had been replaced by sorghum. Or, was there just no new way to ingest this leafy green? I had already massaged it, steamed, braised and broiled it, pureed and pounded it. I served it in soups and salads. No one ever requested it in my cooking class; they just got it. I was minding the dictums of the food police.

Who ARE these arbiters of our menus? Their curriculum vitae are seldom listed in the articles I read. Why are the words guilty and pleasure linked together? What possible connection can they have, holding hands in the same sentence? I looked at the very clean plate in front of me, and thought about how much I enjoyed what I had just consumed. I also knew I wouldn't make the same breakfast again and again over the next week. Not out of guilt, but because I had satisfied my taste for that sugary/salty/comforting combination.

In another of my unscientific, but most careful

observations, I've noticed that most people seem to monitor their food choices according to what their bodies need. I had been on a tour to China for almost a month. We ate lots of rice, very little seafood, and meat of an undisclosed nature. Vegetables were cooked, never served raw. While the group was waiting at the airport to board planes for home, we of course started talking about food, the common denominator of this disparate crowd. One man said he was heading for a Big Mac before he even got his luggage. Another said he dreamed about chocolate. But the one thing every single one of us said was that we craved something green. We all wanted salads! Who would have imagined that? Something inside us responded to the lack of raw, crisp greens we had been used to eating before this trip.

We're living at a time when we have a dizzying array of choices. I've seen the organic sections of grocery markets expand, not contract. I get to the farmers' market early, because the beautiful, fresh produce sells out quickly. Prepared food stations appeal to young and old alike, and the selections are varied and nutritious. We work hard; we work out. We eat well, not because some committee instructs us to, but because we instinctively seem to be drawn to what our bodies need.

With Easter and Passover just around the corner, I began to think about menus. Lamb came to mind for both celebrations. I was fortunate to celebrate Easter with the Bakers the past two years, and seriously, the racks of lamb Linda and John turned out couldn't have been beat. (What's the enemy of good? *Better.*) And these could not have been any better. I needed something equally great, but different. I cast aside the admonitions of the food police, and threw caution and diet to the wind.



PHOTO: GIRMANTAS URBONAS

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For Easter I would make a hearty lamb ragu, full-bodied and glistening with caramelized onions and deeply sautéed vegetables. I'd serve it over pasta, because after all, who doesn't like a noodle? For Passover, when leavened food is not permitted, I'd make a Middle Eastern lamb tagine, heady with cinnamon, saffron, and the sweet spices of the region. I tuned out the flashing sign warning me that there was absolutely no ingredient in either of my dishes that passed the super food of '17 test. Gloom and doom would not be allowed to obliterate my excitement of coming up with recipes for these choices.

I laughed to myself remembering the night my friend Marsha and I trudged four blocks out of our way, in the rain, no less, to a new donut shop we had read about. We had just finished dinner. We weren't hungry, just curious. We used our get out of (guilt) jail free card and finished every glazed morsel. Lightning didn't strike. I can only speak for myself; I didn't have glazed donuts every successive day.

Instead, I had a taste for kale. 🥬

Lamb Tagine with Prunes and Apples

INGREDIENTS

Serves 8

2 t. unsalted butter

2 t. olive oil

3 ½ pounds lamb shoulder, cut into 1½ inch chunks

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Generous pinch of saffron threads, crumbled

3 large carrots, cut into 1½ inch chunks

2 large onions, halved and thinly sliced

3 cloves garlic, finely chopped

1 t. ground ginger

1 t. cinnamon

½ t. ground cumin

1 t. paprika

2 cups water

12 ounces pitted prunes

2 T. lemon juice

¼ cup coarsely chopped cilantro or flat leaf parsley

4 medium tart apples

1 T. butter

1 T. honey

Pinch cinnamon



INSTRUCTIONS

1. Heat the butter and olive oil in a medium enameled cast iron casserole over moderate heat. Season the lamb with kosher salt and freshly ground pepper. Add the lamb to the casserole in batches, being careful not to crowd the meat. Brown lightly on all sides, then transfer to a plate and set aside.
2. Add the carrots, onions, and garlic to the pan and cook over moderately low heat, stirring occasionally, until the onions are softened, but not browned. Add the saffron, ginger, cinnamon, cumin, and paprika. Cook until the spices release their fragrance, about 2-3 minutes.
3. Gradually stir in the water, scraping up the browned bits on the bottom of the pan. Add the lamb to the casserole. The water should almost cover the meat; add more, if necessary. Bring the mixture to a boil, then lower the heat, cover, and simmer gently for 1-1 ½ hours.
4. Meanwhile, soak the prunes in cold water to cover. After the lamb has cooked for 1½ hours, add the prunes. Continue cooking, uncovered, until the prunes have swelled and the sauce has reduced and thickened.
5. Meanwhile, quarter and core the apples. Sauté in a skillet, flesh side down, with the butter, honey, and a pinch of cinnamon until glazed.
6. To serve, place the lamb mixture on a large platter. Drizzle with lemon juice and sprinkle with chopped cilantro or parsley. Decorate with the glazed apples.

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