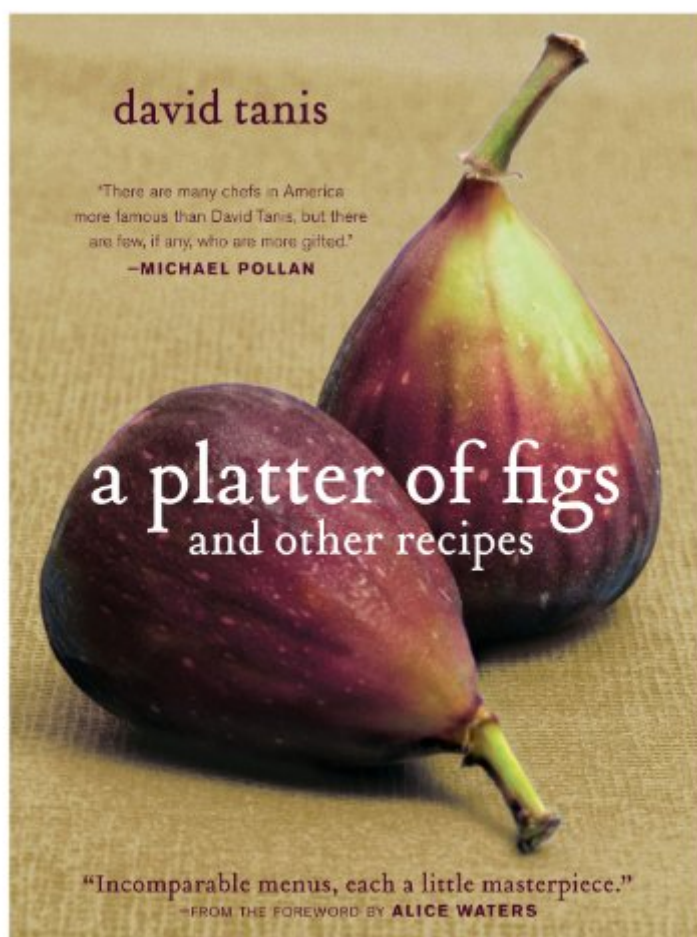


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A Platter Of Figs And Other Recipes



Synopsis

Forget about getting back to the land, David Tanis just wants you to get back to the kitchen. For six months a year, David Tanis is the head chef at Chez Panisse, the Berkeley, California, restaurant where he has worked alongside Alice Waters since the 1980s in creating a revolution in sustainable American cuisine. The other six months, Tanis lives in Paris in a seventeenth-century apartment, where he hosts intimate dinners for friends and paying guests, and prepares the food in a small kitchen equipped with nothing more than an old stove, a little counter space, and a handful of well-used pots and pans. This is the book for anyone who wants to gather and feed friends around a table and nurture their conversation. It's not about showing off with complicated techniques and obscure ingredients. Worlds away from the showy Food Network personalities, Tanis believes that the most satisfying meals "for both the cook and the guest" are invariably the simplest. Home cooks can easily re-create any of his 24 seasonal, market-driven menus, from spring's Supper of the Lamb (Warm Asparagus Vinaigrette; Shoulder of Spring Lamb with Flageolet Beans and Olive Relish; Rum Baba with Cardamom) to winter's North African Comfort Food (Carrot and Coriander Salad; Chicken Tagine with Pumpkin and Chickpeas). Best of all, Tanis is an engaging guide with a genuine gift for words, whose soulful approach to food will make any kitchen, big or small, a warm and compelling place to spend time.

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Customer Reviews

There is a simple test that I have concerning the real worth of any cookbook for me: does it sit on the shelf among my more than 250 cookbooks, or do I find myself repeatedly pulling it out to cook from it or to refer to it for some other reason. Books by Alfred Portale, for example are go-to books. The most telling test of value to me is if I donate it to the local library or pass it on to someone else. I purchased *A Platter of Figs* a while back based on something I had read in *Saveur Magazine*. The book was suggested as a warm appealing book of approachable warm appealing meals for friends by a warm approachable author. Much of that is true of this work. David Tanis comes across as a surviving latter-day hippie who found a job. He lives in Paris and California, and one can't escape the feeling that after his meals with seven other friends (his recipes are indicated as proportioned for eight people), they can all be found on his back porch enveloped in a cloud of sweet-smelling smoke from a stash, holding wine glasses in the dangle-dangerously position and saying words like "cool." It is a good read, and I was left with the image of myself in a pair of tattered jeans, a flannel shirt and a pair of sandals casually turning out knockout dinners while I sipped a glass of wine. The recipes are well thought out (with an occasional mistake or two) and nicely guided by Chef Tanis, and most of them are well within the realm of possibility for any moderately experienced cook. The problem for me with this book is that it is not as simple as it purports to be...not if you are really doing things correctly. The cooking part is a little demanding, but probably not too challenging if you are already fairly adept in a kitchen, but the foraging part is pure *Chez Panisse/California/ France* activity based in a now time-worn litany: find only the best ingredients and cook with them only in season. To that end, frequent the farmers' markets and make friends with purveyors. It seems to me intuitively obvious that most meals would be elevated if an aspiring cook could call his or her supplier and order ten pounds of fresh, grass-fed lamb from a farmer who knew each of his animals by name and who sang them to sleep at night so that they would have tender dreams, and match the meat offering with a side of asparagus that came wrapped with a note from the farmer's wife. ("Ere it is, David. I have picked it myself only this morning for you. The dew is still on the florets.") David Tanis's work is a bit removed from the reality that most of us do not have the connections to which he is so accustomed, and that leaves many of us with foraging on a much different level for ingredients. He mentions, in one chapter, for example, that shortly after the

arrival of good friends, they all took off to a local farmer's market to look for items for supper. Do you have a farm market to which you would all go to look for food? Do you have friends who would consider that type of outing as a primary function? Those who already have their own suppliers and access to premium quality goods and services, will find that this book does provide the methodology for producing very good meals, but then again, so do books produced by Judy Rogers (and she is a wonderfully instructive teacher as well), Alice Waters, Thomas Keller, and many other food notables. If you are looking to make a shift in your life style/approach to the whole process...and I mean the whole process...of cooking, then this book may well provide you with access to, and inspiration for, that change. If not, if you are going to substitute store bought mayonnaise rather than make your own, (Tannis "vehemently" rejects the idea of that substitution), if you are going to purchase supermarket beef, or if you are willing to forget the seasonality thing and use that mid-winter tomato anyway, then you may well, after getting to the end of a meal made from recipes found in the book, wonder what all the hoopla was about. The meal may have been better than what you would have produced, but it probably would not be better than you could have done with any good collection of good recipes. Tanis's book is an interesting read. Tanis is friendly, and his style lends itself to on-the-couch-with-feet-on-the-coffee-table reading. It is just important to understand the caveat that that the distance between your meals and David's is based on your ability in foraging as much as anything else. If you understand that getting the best out of this book involves some seriously extended effort, and decide that seven other people are worth that effort, then a neat adventure waits for you. (I say this without a trace of sarcasm. I have gone to some pretty good lengths to produce some special meals, had the pleasure of working with some great purveyors, and produced some outstanding feasts.) If you are just looking for a book that provides you with the wherewith all to cook for friends, though, you might look into Ina Garten books. The recipes and methods there produce good food, and they are not predicated on the idea you that you locate a berry stand somewhere on route 15 that has the best blackberries in the state of Wherever-You-Live. By the way, I gave my copy of *A Platter of Figs* to a friend who enjoys cooking. I know the mantra and when I will choose to follow it. He can anguish over the off-season tomato.

David Tanis starts this book with two questions: "Do you really need a recipe for a platter of figs? No. Is that the point? Yes." So here is a book that helps cooks understand how to come up with recipes and menus using their own intuition. Make what is fresh, make what is available, make what is reasonable, and make what tastes good. This book starts with a short summary of Tanis's career, then moves into season three-course menus. Each menu starts with a quick, simple starter, then

moves into a more complex main dish, followed by a simple dessert. Sometimes the starters and desserts involve about 5-10 minutes worth of work. Sometimes the main course might take two days to prep and cook. But nothing is overly complicated or impossible. Each menu starts with a page explaining the inspiration for the menu, then each dish gets a paragraph describing it. This is a great book for home cooks, but also for us chefs who like to cook simple food at home. The recipes are straightforward but with great flavors and techniques.

I am a cookbook freak. I am not even sure how many I own and I don't want to count them-it borders on a disorder! But then again, I used to work as a personal chef, and although I love to eat out, I tend to cook at home most nights, so my obsession goes to good use. Of all my cookbooks I have a few tried and true books that I turn to again and again- this is one of them. I have made from this book: green chili stew, salmon with Vietnamese cucumbers, spinach pie, pork loin, paella with shrimp and squid ink, to name a few. All have turned out well. There are so many memoir type cookbooks out there and although this is not officially one of them, Tanis does have his personal musings about food included with each menu. I love the memoir/cookbook genre, but they can be a bit precious.... "The waft of the scent of (fill in name of flower/fruit) blossoms from the (fill in name of tree) in (fill in glamorous or exotic country) where my family had a house....." Tanis' musings are so engaging but with a down to earth voice that does not come off like he is trying to write a poetic novel. I have actually read both his books cover to cover. He wrote one sentence about zucchini as a preface to another recipe for zucchini and I have taken this idea and eaten it literally hundreds of times adding my own variations (zucchini and onion cut up and slowly stewed in olive oil as a side dish, or over pasta). This is what I love about this book- Tanis encourages you to explore, to work with food the way a chef does- not by following exact times but cooking by smell, sight and feel and substituting based on what you happen to have on hand or what looks good at the market. The book is also very of the moment (it's divided into seasonal menus) and yet not at all fussy. You would happily have eaten these foods years ago and will happily eat it years from now. There are some unusual menus and ingredients that I would not try (a chicken terrine that looks a bit jello-y and aspic-y and not my thing), but overall I highly recommend this book.

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