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Health Foods Done Right

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In 1980, Helen Nearing, the mother of the back-to-the-land movement (as her husband Scott Nearing was its father) wrote a curmudgeonly cookbook called ?Simple Food for the Good Life.? A self-described ?anti-cook,? Helen viewed food as something you shouldn?t fuss over. Neighbors (of which I was one, until her death in 1995) joked about her recipes for Horse Chow (raw oats, raisins, lemon, salt and oil) and Crusty Carrot Croakers (made with ?the residue from making carrot juice.?) But Helen was a better cook than she admitted and a generous one who would always set an extra place at her table.

For me, her book is a touchstone, a reminder of how simple and quick good food can be, and it came to mind recently as I was pondering where ?health food? goes wrong and what makes it go right.

I was outside a drive-in seafood joint, eating fried clams and a milkshake in my car and eyeing the natural-foods cafe next door where, according to my belief system, I should have been lunching instead. What was the turnoff? The way they put vegan mayonnaise in everything, even sandwiches with eggs or meat? Was it the mud-colored vegetable medleys? Or the quesadillas without any cheese? An irresistible smell of things bobbing madly in hot fat had guided my hand to the left turn signal, not an aroma of denial and guilt.

Health food these days tends to define itself by prohibitions, including those that should apply only to people with genuine food sensitivities. Gluten, lactose and salt are treated like poisons. Fat is the road to hell, and red meat is the road to the grave, even if it?s from a happy, local, organic, grass-fed, free-range, hormone- and antibiotic-free animal, a distinction that eludes the fervently herbivorous. Asian food is prominent on health menus because anything Western in the world of alternative lifestyles is disdained. But the hands that stir those woks rarely have the deft touch with vegetables and sauces that real Asian cooks display.

So who does healthful food right? Nora Pouillon, for one, whose Restaurant Nora in Dupont Circle was the first in the United States to receive organic certification. Flavor chez Nora is never sacrificed on a political altar and owes much to the freshness and high quality of the produce. Among my other favorites, Chase?s Daily, an acclaimed lunch spot in Belfast, Maine, sets another positive example. I ate there three times before I realized the menu was vegetarian. Why? Maybe because there were no rectangles of tofu or seitan (a modern product made from wheat gluten) offered as meat impersonators. In the hands of a skilled Korean chef, tofu is like a bowl of clouds rather than the texture of a flip-flop.

Helen Nearing was a vegetarian, too, something that I am not. But I appreciate the fact that her recipes were written by her garden. The vegetables in her dishes crossed the threshold of her kitchen moments before her drop-in visitors did and were given places of honor at the table.

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