

# the feast



PHOTOS: BEN DEARNLEY

Thanks to Alice Zaslavsky's use of marinated artichokes, you can make her sunny saffron orzo year-round. Below, walnut eggplant rolls.

**W**e know we should eat more vegetables. But knowing doesn't necessarily change behaviour. Writer and broadcaster Alice Zaslavsky comes at this conundrum in a compelling way: Start where you are and savour the journey.

"It's a much more inclusive kind of conversation to say, 'This is delicious. This is tasty. You're going to enjoy it. Find what it is that makes you curious about it,'" says Zaslavsky, a MasterChef Australia alum and former high school teacher who lives on the Mornington Peninsula, south of Melbourne.

"It's exactly the same thing that I've been doing with kids for over a decade. And adults are, at the end of the day, just bigger kids at heart. Particularly when it comes to vegetables, because we still remember the way that we were told to eat our veg."

At nearly 500 pages, Zaslavsky's vegetable-loving message is big and bold. Her second book, *In Praise of Veg* (Appetite by Random House, 2022), features more than 150 recipes highlighting 50 of her favourite vegetables.

The book is a riot of colour, with vibrant illustrations by Halifax, N.S. artist Vera Babida and organized by hue. Purple for radicchio, artichoke and eggplant, for instance. Dark green for spinach, arugula and broccoli.

Zaslavsky wrote her first book, *Alice's Food A-Z* (Walker Books Australia, 2015), after she competed on *MasterChef* in 2012. Aimed at young readers, she soon realized a limitation. Given its A-to-Z structure, it could only be translated into languages using the Latin alphabet.

"I wanted this one to be globally translatable and transferable," says Zaslavsky of *In Praise of Veg*, which has been published in 11 countries and translated into several languages since November 2020, when it came out in Australia. "Colour is universal."

Zaslavsky and her family left Tbilisi, Georgia for Australia in 1990. Food has always been her way of connecting with people, she recalls. Before she learned how to speak English, she brought snacks to share with her elementary school classmates.

Later, as a classics teacher and then head of the humanities department, foods such as pita, tarama and tzatziki became a springboard for discussing ancient civilizations.

"The kids were really engaging with the material," says Zaslavsky. "It brought it into their real lives, and so I could see that interconnectedness. Food was my hook."

Her Year 8 students (13-14 years old) were having fun and interested in the course work. But at the same time, they lacked the skills to dice an onion let alone cook a

meal for themselves.

Zaslavsky pitched a food and culture elective. But her heads of school were hesitant. She lacked culinary expertise and they doubted enough students would enrol.

"So, I said, 'I'll show you.' And I went off and did a chef-at-home course with a Michelin-starred chef every weekend for a year."

At the end of that year, *MasterChef* was holding auditions, and Zaslavsky saw an opportunity to boost interest in her elective. She had never watched the show but had heard students talking about it. Now that she had the expertise, a TV appearance could help enrolment.

As it turned out, *MasterChef* marked the beginning of Zaslavsky's food career. Though she is no longer a teacher, her interest in education has continued.

She has since created *Phenomenom*, a free food literacy resource for teachers, including activities, lesson plans and episodes (which Babida animates).

Research suggests that talking with kids about the health benefits of vegetables lowers their expectations, she highlights. Relegating food to conversations about "healthy eating" has the opposite effect: Kids expect to like vegetables less. Instead, Zaslavsky advocates integrating cuisine and agriculture into other lessons.

Food has been taught in isolation for too long, she emphasizes. With *Phenomenom*, they have found that engagement goes up — whether kids are studying art, math or science — when they start with food. "It's kind of like health by stealth."

Zaslavsky wrote *In Praise of Veg* because she knew there was a problem to solve. In Australia, 93.9 per cent of adults do not meet the daily guidelines for fruit and vegetables, a National Health Survey showed. Only 29.3 per cent of Canadians buy (let alone eat) the recommended amount of produce, according to a 2021 *Agri-Food Analytics Lab* report.

The book also came about because piquing kids' curiosity can only go so far when their parents are underseasoning and overboiling vegetables. "If I'm going to lead that horse to water, I need that water to taste good."

Zaslavsky closes *In Praise of Veg* with an epilogue discussing chefs and vegetables — she intersperses quotes from chefs around the world throughout the book, including Canadians Amanda Cohen, May Chow and Michael Hunter — and her philosophy on kids and vegetables.

Exposure has been shown to be "the No. 1 best way" for children to build positive relationships with food, explains Zaslavsky. And it starts long before they begin eating solids.

"Becoming a parent has

## Ask Alice

AUSTRALIAN WRITER AND BROADCASTER'S VEG-LOVING MESSAGE IS IN VIVID COLOUR, WITH A CANADIAN CONNECTION

LAURA BREHAUT



certainly created some really fantastic opportunities for empirical evidence." Since her three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Hazel, was six months old, Zaslavsky has been documenting her experiencing food. It started with "squelching and squishing." Now, Hazel eats with chopsticks, and a knife and fork, says please and thank you, and watches what Zaslavsky and her husband, Nick, eat.

"People say to me, 'Oh, she eats everything.' And I say, 'No, she doesn't. She eats everything that tastes good.' And it's up to her. I want her to have agency and I want her to have her own tastes and build her own food literacy and know that she can trust herself."

Zaslavsky recalls two of the children cast in *Phenomenom* videos. Set in a classroom of the future, she taught them about the won-

ders of food while they tasted and talked about what they were experiencing. She was unaware the young actors were averse to vegetables.

Through the weeks of filming, the children ate more vegetables than ever before and have continued to do so. Zaslavsky knew then they were onto something.

"Vegetables are such a pain point for people, even just in terms of the limitations that they set on themselves. Once they realize that actually Brussels sprouts aren't the enemy, what other limiting beliefs are holding them back? I know it seems like it's just a book of frittata and fritter recipes," she says, laughing. "But I do truly believe that the reason we need to change our attitudes is because, firstly, it will make us feel better. But secondly, it will show us that we're the ones holding ourselves back. Mind over matter."

### SAFFRON ORZO WITH CHARRED DELI ARTICHOKEs

- 1/3 cup (80 mL) olive oil
- 6 cooked artichokes with stems (see tip), halved lengthwise
- 2 shallots, finely chopped
- 1 bunch of parsley, stems finely chopped, leaves picked and chopped
- 1 1/2 cups (330 g) orzo (or risoni)
- 3 cups (750 mL) vegetable stock
- A good pinch of saffron threads
- 2 tsp finely chopped preserved lemon
- 1/2 cup (60 g) hazelnuts, lightly toasted, then roughly chopped

1. Heat 2 tablespoons of the olive oil in a large frying pan over high heat. Add the artichokes cut side down and cook, without touching, for 4 minutes, or until charred and golden. Remove and drain on paper towel.

2. Add the remaining oil to the pan over medium-low heat. Add the shallot and parsley stems and cook for 4 minutes, or until softened.

3. Place the artichokes on top of the orzo, face side up. Cover and cook for 3 minutes to warm through.

4. Transfer to a serving dish and sprinkle with the chopped parsley and hazelnuts. Serve warm or cold.

**Serves:** 4

**Tip:** Most continental delis sell two types of marinated artichokes — one preserved in oil, which tends to be just the heart, the other most likely kept in brine, with more of the leaf intact. Whichever you choose is up to you. Jarred artichokes are more than a suitable replacement.

**Shortcut:** Instead of orzo, use instant couscous, frying up the artichokes while the kettle (or vegetable stock) comes to the boil. Stir saffron into the couscous just before pouring the hot liquid over it.

**Double duty:** This dish is one step away from being a pasta salad. Chop or tear the marinated artichokes into chunks, crumble some feta on top and serve cold — it's a fantastic 'bring a plate' or desk-lunch option.

### BADRIJANI: WALNUT EGGPLANT ROLLS

- 5-6 small-medium eggplants, 1.5 kg (3 lb 5 oz) total
- Olive oil spray
- 1 cup (120 g) shelled walnuts
- 1 garlic clove, peeled
- 1 tsp white wine vinegar
- 1/2 tsp ground coriander
- 1/2 tsp curry powder
- Pomegranate seeds, to serve
- Cilantro leaves, to serve

Pomegranate sauce:

- 1/3 cup (80 mL) pomegranate molasses
- 1/3 cup (80 mL) tahini
- 1/3 cup (80 mL) extra virgin olive oil

1. Preheat the oven to 400F. Line three baking trays with parchment paper and spray with olive oil spray.

2. Cut the eggplants vertically into slices 8 mm (3/8 inch) thick. Try to keep the 'butts' on each side to a minimum, as these don't fold too well. Arrange on the lined baking trays in a single layer, then spray with olive oil spray.

3. Bake for 50-60 minutes, turning over halfway, until golden on both sides, softened and cooked through.

4. Meanwhile, blitz the walnuts, garlic, vinegar, spices and 1/4 cup (60 ml) just-boiled water in a blender until a smooth paste forms. Season with salt and pepper.

5. When the eggplant is completely pliable, remove from the oven and leave until cool enough to handle. Scoop a teaspoon of the walnut paste onto one of the short edges of each slice, then roll, pressing the end over and resting it on this side to keep it secure.

6. Arrange the eggplant rolls on a platter. Drizzle with some of the dipping sauce and sprinkle with pomegranate seeds and cilantro. Serve with remaining sauce.

**Serves:** 4-6 as a starter

**Tip:** Walnuts are up there with pine nuts in being highly susceptible to rancidity once cracked. Beware of sealed packets with a long shelf life, particularly if the nuts look powdery. Either take the time to crack your own, or buy them from a bulk store where you can ask to taste before you buy. Store any leftover nuts in an airtight container in the fridge.

**Shortcut:** You can circumvent the walnut shelling by subbing in crunchy peanut butter (or any nut butter). To speed up the eggplant side, salt the slices, pat them dry and grill instead of baking — they'll turn out slipperier, but cook more quickly. Drizzle with molasses instead of the pomegranate sauce.

**Double duty:** Any leftover nut paste can be loosened off with mayonnaise and tossed through your next salad as a creamy, aromatic dressing. It's also a fab addition to Georgian lobio.

Weekend Post

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