



## Book Review

### **The long table cookbook: Plant-based recipes for optimal health— nourishing food for small and large gatherings**

Amy Symington

Douglas and McIntyre, 2019, 244 pages

Review by Dr. Japji Anna Bas, Jake Robitaille, Alejandro Bas

The not-so-long table: a narrative, collaborative, and personal exploration of a book on cooking for gatherings in a time of physical distancing

#### *Launch of the collaborative review*

#### **Japji:**

In the early days of the pandemic, during the first wave, I eagerly accepted the opportunity to review Amy Symington's "Long Table Cookbook: Plant-based recipes for optimal health—nourishing food for small and large gatherings". As a food policy researcher with a focus on health and wellbeing and a background as the owner of a sustainable vegetarian restaurant, the fit seemed perfect. I would use the time at home with my children to explore the recipes and review the cookbook.

In reality, however, the day to day of being a single parent to two school-aged children going through remote learning in a global pandemic was a lot—*is* a lot—and the task of trying new recipes and hoping that my picky younger child would eat felt out of reach. I spent time exploring the cookbook, admiring the large, glorious, full colour images with longing... and a little dismay. I *wanted* to review the cookbook but simply had too much on my plate to manage it all. Ever a proponent of community solutions, I had an idea—I proposed a barter with Jake, an aspiring young vegan chef in my neighbourhood, and he agreed enthusiastically. He would cook from the cookbook, share the food with me and I would offer him whole person transformational

coaching as part of my practicum for my COVID-career pivot. A collective solution for the review of a cookbook on sharing food.

**Jake:**

In the days leading up to the pandemic, my relationship with food was questionable at best. When the wave of patrons ceased and my employment was put on hold, food and I were sleeping on the opposite side of the bed. Months passed and the burning passion I once held for nourishment turned to cold-hearted efficiency, blending two thousand calories so I could be done with eating for the day. When the opportunity to participate in this project and give feedback as a chef was extended to me, I was elated. Food and I decided to try again.

This book consists of recipes for a wide variety of seasons and celebrations and includes measurements for gatherings of six or twenty-four people. In the age of physical distancing, the ability to scale recipes back to six servings was incredibly helpful. The recipes range from extremely simple (such as the chocolate dipped oranges or granny smith apples with date caramel) to vaguely intermediate. Many recipes include straightforward tasks that can be delegated to children or guests who are adamant about assisting in the kitchen. Definitions of culinary terms are provided, instructions are clear, and specialty ingredients are often listed as optional. This creates an atmosphere of accessibility, which is crucial for the success of the plant-based food movement.

**Alejandro (age 11 at time of tasting, age 12 at time of writing):**

The start of the pandemic was a long time ago and, to be honest, I don't really remember how I was feeling about food at the time. I do remember feeling confused about how to feel about the pandemic. When I first found out about the collective cookbook review project, I was a little hesitant—would I even like the vegan cooking? But since it was a pandemic and there were not a lot of new things to try, I was open to trying the food and agreed to become a taste tester for the project.

*Cooking process and taste evaluation*

*Sweet potato and tahini soup*

**Jake:**

The review process started in late September, and I thought it would be best to begin with something warm and comforting that incorporated in season ingredients. The sweet potato and tahini soup was the ideal candidate. This soup takes about an hour to complete, has four steps in the cooking process, and an additional five steps if you choose to make the garnishes suggested.

It is a low hassle first course or midweek meal option that leaves you energized. The dish is incredibly creamy despite the use of low-fat coconut milk, but in terms of flavour I found it to be muted. With only half a teaspoon of salt for twelve cups of soup, it is easy to understand why. I recommend seasoning the onions with salt at the beginning of the cooking process and bringing the amount of lime juice up from a quarter cup to a third to cut through the fattiness of the dish. Overall rating: 6.5/10

**Japji:**

By text, Jake had said that the soup felt “more like a queso dip than a soup. Intentionally unsalted to make room for tortilla chips.” With low expectations, I actually left it to sit in the fridge for a couple of days. When I finally did taste it, I was pleasantly surprised and wrote back, “Gotta be honest, I like the soup \*way\* more than I thought I would.” This leads me to wonder if the soup may have matured in that time, as soups and stews often do. In any case, I gave it a 7.5/10.

**Alejandro:**

I remember being surprised about how good it was and I also remember being someone who liked it more than all the adults. I give it an 8/10.

*Cinnamon bun cookies*

**Jake:**

These cookies are deceptively simple. There are three components: dough, cinnamon filling, and cashew icing. Each component shares multiple ingredients, and every ingredient is commonly found in a plant-based person's kitchen. Perfect for when you need to limit the number of trips you take to the grocery store. With twenty minutes of active prep time, twenty minutes of freezing the dough, and twelve minutes of baking, this recipe is practically effortless. The only difficulty that arose was rolling out the dough, but that was due to limited counter space. These cookies are also quite filling, which is helpful, otherwise I would have eaten the entire batch. Overall rating: 8/10

**Japji:**

Having tasted several other recipes from the cookbook, there had been a recurring theme—11-year-old Alejandro was consistently more enthusiastic about the taste of the food than Jake (the vegan chef). I, the former vegetarian cafe owner, also consistently rated the food slightly lower than Alejandro. With the cinnamon bun cookies, for the first time, we were all pleased and gave them an 8/10. Of the batch that came to our home, I only ate one and Alejandro ate the rest.

*Spiced banana cakes with orange frosting*

**Jake:**

I really wanted to like this recipe, and after having tried the Cinnamon Bun Cookies I had such high hopes. I was ultimately let down. Most of the fat in this recipe comes from the cashews in the frosting, and the lack of fat in the cake causes it to be denser than desired. In addition, the taste of the cake was overwhelmingly metallic and astringent. The use of unsweetened chocolate and unsweetened soy milk would not be an issue if there was more sugar in the recipe to balance it out. I was sure there was an issue with my oven based on the batter tasting better prior to being baked, but to my surprise, the finished product was well received by many other people.

Overall rating: 4/10

**Japji:**

Like Jake, this cake was the least liked item from the cookbook. I found it bland and dry and only moderately improved with the frosting. That being said, when eaten in equal parts cake to icing, it was enjoyable... I am a fan of cashew butter. With extra icing, I gave it a 6/10.

Alejandro, on the other hand, just did not like it. He rated it a 5/10—the lowest he rated any of the foods we tried from the cookbook. Because we tried the cake at a time when we were in a bubble with two other moms in our building, I shared it with them. Interestingly, they both really liked it and gave it an 8/10, though one of them felt that the icing did not suit the cake.

*Lentil and spinach pot pie*

**Jake:**

This is a delightful main course that makes you feel good before you have had the pleasure of eating it and is sure to put any questions of protein deficiency on a plant-based diet to rest. However, the pleasure of eating it comes more from the satisfaction of making pie dough from scratch than the flavour. The spelt flour crust was slightly chewier than expected and had an earthy flavour that, while complimentary to the filling, felt a bit one-dimensional. I found myself seasoning at the table with extra salt, pepper, and nutritional yeast. The recipe is a bit prep heavy but makes for a great team building exercise if you are lucky enough to share a living space with someone. Overall rating: 7/10

**Japji:**

The pot pie was fantastic. I could have eaten it for dinner for several days straight. An easy 8/10. But the best thing really was my son's response. He did not realize that it was part of the cookbook project when we had it for dinner... Our conversation about the pie says it all:

**Alejandro:** “Mom, this is really good, but it would be better if it had just a little bit more meat.”

**Mom:** “It would be better if it had a bit more meat?”

**Alejandro:** “Yeah. But, like, just a little. Like a little, little bit more meat. It’s almost perfect.”

**Mom:** “Sweetheart, it’s vegan--it doesn’t have any meat.”

**Alejandro:** “... wait! What? This doesn’t have any meat? Wait! Is this part of that cookbook thing? Wow. It’s really good. Still, it would be a bit better if it had more meat.”

**Mom:** [laughing] “So, a little bit more than none?”

**Alejandro:** “Yeah, but it’s still like an 8 or a 9.”

Child who views “more meat” as a blanket way to “improve” a dish loves it—vegan lentil-spinach pot pie for the win!

## Conclusion

### **Jake:**

Having worked in professional kitchens for a number of years, I wanted to approach the preparation of these meals as I would dinner service. While cooking I imagined the pressure to pique the interest of hungry guests, awaiting the fragrant fare they had yet to be acquainted with. I thought of potential hosting duties and how a recipe would interfere with or yield to them. While plating I wondered how likely it would be that a family member or friend would be impressed enough to ask for the recipe, or how I would feel about serving this to an experienced cook. After tasting a number of these recipes and gauging how they made me feel, I found this method to be in direct conflict with the main goal of the book.

Cooking this food is incredibly easy. Even the more labour-intensive dishes are a breeze to prep for and wash up after. As a result, the end product is often one you would expect from a simple dish. The strength of these recipes comes from their ability to show the people who care about you that their affection is reciprocated by providing nutrient-rich food that subtly wishes them a long and happy life. Cooking this food made me feel more appreciative of the few people I was fortunate enough to see on a regular basis during this difficult period.

### **Japji:**

The task of reviewing a cookbook for social gatherings during a time of physical distancing presented unique challenges. Fortunately, our use of a collective approach, beyond being a creative solution, offered opportunities for a novel approach—a multi-person cookbook review. In turn, this novel approach offered unanticipated findings. All three of us were surprised to find that the vegan chef was the most critical and it was the meat-eating Alejandro who most enjoyed it. In offering a range of perspectives on the experience of the food we have, we hope, offered additional insights.

*Dr. Japji Anna Bas is a Food Policy, Wellbeing & Equity Expert and Transformational Coach at Flourish Wellbeing Sass. She launched her career as the owner and manager of a local, sustainable full-service vegetarian cafe in Halifax, the Big Life Whole Foods Cafe. Over the years Dr. Bas has worked on food issues with Oxfam Canada, LifeCycles, the Ecology Action Centre, Nourish and Ryerson's Centre for Studies in Food Security. Japji is also an avid cook, a playful yogi, a dance floor mama and mother to two spritely children.*