

ARTS & CULTURE

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All in the Family

Diane Forley thinks learning the basics of botany can make you a better cook.

REVIEWED BY CHARLOTTE BRUCE HARVEY '78



[BOOK] *The Anatomy of a Dish* by Diane Forley '84 with Catherine Young (Artisan).

FOUR YEARS AGO CHEF DIANE FORLEY WAS CLEANING OUT the walk-in refrigerator in her Manhattan garden restaurant, Verbena, when she spotted an aging salsify root that had sprouted. As she was about to pitch it, Forley observed that the

budding leaves looked a lot like endive, and she said as much to a farmer who was delivering potatoes that day.

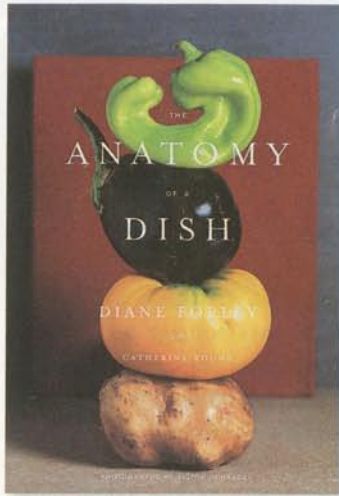
The similarity was no surprise to him: salsify and endive (as well as daisies and sunflowers) belong to the botanical family *Compositae* and so share the same flower structure of a circular center surrounded by tight rings of petals. The farmer then explained to Forley that the potatoes he was dropping off belonged to the *Solanaceae* family, plants with five-petaled tubular flowers; Europeans, he explained, were initially wary of the potatoes, peppers, and tomatoes early explorers brought back from the New World because the flowers resembled belladonna, or deadly nightshade, a member of the same family.

The conversation triggered a fascination with botany that prompted For-

ley to write this unusually cerebral and lush cookbook. Studying plant families from both a botanical and a culinary perspective, Forley found that some of her favorite food matches were in fact marriages between awfully close botanical relatives. The family *Liliaceae*, for instance, includes leeks, chives, garlic, and asparagus. "I realized that asparagus and leeks are a favorite pairing of mine," she writes. "I remembered leek chowder with

asparagus and pea shoots and a fricassee of asparagus, leeks, and snow peas served with lemon porridge. My cooking, it seems, was one step ahead of my learning." (That porridge, by the way, is an inspired cheeseless risotto that Forley punches up with lemon and basil and thickens with eggs, like the Greek soup *avgolemono*. For those who want to gild their *Liliaceae*, she suggests adding lobster or lump crabmeat.)

As much an egghead as a cook, Forley excels in explaining the logic behind classical French cooking techniques. A chapter



called "Vegetable Studies" includes instructions for both braising and steaming artichokes, and suggestions for slicing their hearts into gratins or griddlecakes, or just mashing the meat with olive oil, garlic, and tarragon and smearing it on bruschetta. *The Anatomy of a Dish* was a finalist in the 2003 cookbook awards sponsored by the International Association of Culinary Professionals. (Another finalist was *In the Hands of a Chef*, by Jody Adams '80, but both Forley and Adams lost out to Judy Rodgers's *Zuni Café Cookbook*.) *Anatomy of a Dish* won this year's James Beard award for cookbook photography, thanks to Victor Schrager's stylized still lifes, which open each chapter. The book is also liberally illustrated with botanical drawings and a series of charts detailing plant families and the flavors of their various parts. All this abundance ultimately overwhelms the book, though; it feels both overdesigned and overconceived. In the end, the relationship Forley tries to draw between botanical families and flavor, however conceptually interesting, doesn't really bear out in the kitchen.

What does bear out is Forley's immense talent—both as a chef and a teacher of cooking—and her commitment to coaxing from each ingredient the full range and depth of flavor it can offer. Her pickled beets are seductively complex, simmered in red wine and vinegar spiced with cinnamon, black peppercorns, thyme, and bay leaves. Sweet and sour, earthy and bright, they're an instant staple for salads, even if you're too timid (or lazy) to put them in her formidable ruby-red risotto with beet greens on top. Sometimes the parts are as good as the whole.

CHARLOTTE BRUCE HARVEY is the BAM's managing editor.

The Lady Can Sing

Erin McKeown takes her cues from Judy Garland and Elvis Costello. REVIEWED BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS '86

[MUSIC] *Grand* by Erin McKeown '00 (Nettwerk America).

AT THE 1997 FALCON RIDGE FOLK FESTIVAL IN HILLSDALE, New York, singer-songwriter Andrew Calhoun was manning a booth for his company, Waterbug Records—an artists' co-op representing some of the most accomplished songwriters in the folk underground—when nineteen-year-old Erin McKeown introduced herself and played him a few songs. "I have to say," Calhoun recalled in a recent interview, "she taught me more about the structure of music than anyone before or since."

Six years later McKeown's third full-length CD, *Grand*, provides further evidence of her youthful sophistication as a writer, singer, and instrumentalist. Stylistically, *Grand* is like a hip vintage clothing store; it evokes the heydays of swing, cabaret jazz, and Hollywood musicals, as well as the late '70s new-wave rock of Joe Jackson and Elvis Costello.

McKeown plays up the retro associations by referring to herself both in song and on her Web site as the Lady: "If you want to be a lady," she sings over ragtime guitar picking, "well then, have a look at me / Folks line up for days just to have a look-see." All this could easily come off as a campy game of dress-up, but McKeown exudes a genuine love of classic songcraft that makes the music feel like her own.



CRITIC'S CORNER

» "This is not another exploitative ghetto flick about guns, drugs, crooked cops, and gangbangers, but a tightly knit, street-smart, funny, and poignant human drama—one that's always a match-strike away from flashpoint," the *New York*

Daily News proclaimed of *Washington Heights*, written by Nat Moss '87 and director Alfredo De Villa. The movie focuses on Carlos, a Latino comic-book artist whose life changes after his father is paralyzed in a holdup of the family's bodega. After just a week of rehearsal the film was shot in the neighborhood in eighteen days. "It puts to shame Hollywood's higher-profile but hackneyed efforts at reflecting Hispanic life in the United States," wrote Rene Rodriguez in the *Miami Herald*. Moss and De Villa attended Columbia's graduate film school and the Sundance Screenwriters Lab together, then spent two years on the script with the help of actor Manny Perez and author Junot Diaz. *New York Newsday's* John Anderson called the film a "Portrait of an artist as a young hombre," adding, "It's less an acculturation tale than an emphatic declaration of 'We are here.'" —MARIA DI MENTO '03