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New book highlights the flavors of Chicago's neighborhoods

By JANE AMMESON - HP Food Columnist Sep 19, 2018 Updated Sep 19, 2018

Chicago is a city made of neighborhoods, each individual and diverse, reflective of its residents and the restaurants anchoring them.

In her latest book, “Local Flavor: Restaurants That Shaped Chicago’s Neighborhoods,” Jean Iversen chronicles her impressions and interactions of eight Chicago eateries and the people who made them what they are.

It started when Iversen, a Chicago-based writer, was researching her first book, “BYOB Chicago: Your Guide to Bring-Your-Own-Bottle Restaurants and Wine & Spirits Stores in Chicago.”

“Along the way, there were a handful of restaurants that inspired me,” she says. “The ones I chose for the book weren’t the oldest restaurants in Chicago, I just wanted them to be run by the ‘mayors’ – restaurateurs who had become leaders of their small sections of Chicago over the years.”

Some of the eateries had long roots in the community, such as Won Kow, a Chinatown restaurant that opened 90 years ago before closing this year.

Iversen says she asked baseline questions, such as “How have you managed to stay in business?” The answers, she found, were often similar.

“They were gracious, treated their customers well, offered quality food and had old-school values,” she says. “They hadn’t gone out of style and were adaptable.”

Each restaurant’s story opens a door, and we get to see the personalities of the owners, their workers and their customers. She also collected recipes – a daunting task.

“They weren’t intellectual property as far as the owners were concerned, many just hadn’t written them down,” she says. “I had to get them to sit down and get them to tell me more specific amounts than just ‘a little bit of this and that.’”

The following recipe is courtesy of Iversen. It is from the Red Apple Buffet, a popular Polish restaurant on North Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago.

Glorious Fall Plum Tart

6 ounces Baker’s cheese (can substitute ricotta or cottage cheese)

4 tablespoons sunflower oil

2 tablespoons honey

1 egg

12 ounces light wheat flour

1 tablespoon baking powder

Extra butter for baking sheet

3 pounds plums

For the topping:

4 ounces ground hazelnuts

3 tablespoons honey

1 teaspoon cinnamon

4 ounces butter, cold

Heat an oven to 400 degrees.

Mix the Baker's cheese with the oil, honey and egg, preferably by hand. If using an electric mixer, use a very slow speed.

Combine the flour with the baking powder. Add this slowly to the cheese mixture to form the dough.

Wrap the dough in plastic wrap, and refrigerate it for about an hour.

After an hour, spread the dough thinly onto a buttered cookie sheet. Cut the plums in half, and discard the pits.

Neatly arrange the halves on top of the dough.

For the topping, combine the hazelnuts, honey and cinnamon. With a knife, cut in the cold butter. To achieve proper consistency, do not handle the butter. Crumble topping over plums.

Bake for 30 to 45 minutes, until plums are soft.

Cool for 5 to 10 minutes before serving.
