

21L.707

Essay #1

On its front cover, *The Forest Feast* by Erin Gleeson proclaims itself a book of “Simple Vegetarian Recipes from My Cabin in the Woods,” right away evoking the uncomplicated life of simple pleasures that she depicts throughout all her recipes. More than just a collection of recipes, the book portrays a lifestyle, and appeals to readers who long for this lifestyle. Gleeson uses her own self-taught background, easy and seasonal ingredients, and extremely visual recipes to bring readers into her life and make it seem simple and accessible.

The recipe book starts off with an introduction that describes Gleeson’s background. She begins with her childhood: “I grew up in an apple orchard in Sonoma County, California, in the 1980s, next door to a minicommune and some goat farmers. We had no TV, we were vegetarian, and we had a huge vegetable garden.” Immediately, the reader is drawn to the huge contrast between this description and modern life. It is an appeal to the reader who wants to return to a simpler time. She recounts how after many years in New York City, she and her husband moved back to California into a cabin in the woods outside town, representing her own return back to her childhood life. Throughout her introduction, she provides legitimacy, citing her years of experience entertaining and doing food photography, but also highlights her vulnerability. “I felt stuck, and on top of it, guilty that I wasn’t contributing financially to our household,” she recounts, portraying herself as imperfect and her life as more relatable and accessible. She

also later mentions, “because I am a self-taught cook, the recipes I set out to make were very simple,” again emphasizing the accessibility of her recipes.

The introduction is followed by a section called “how to use this book” in which she describes how she herself doesn’t have time to read all the directions and go through all the steps to make a dish from a typical cookbook. Instead, she hopes to present recipes “visually, beautifully, simply,” suggesting that she hopes these recipes can be used more frequently and easily than recipes from a typical cookbook. She also touches on the types of ingredients she uses, which she describes as local, seasonal, sustainable produce with few other ingredients. These ingredients are also reminiscent of a simpler time without the abundance of processed foods and fancy, time-consuming recipes. They fit well with her natural and outdoorsy lifestyle. She does say “I don’t claim to be a purist. If I need a tomato for a recipe in the winter, I will buy one.” This confession again makes her seem a little less perfect and a little more accepting and encouraging since many of her readers may not live in California where much more produce is seasonal year-round.

Throughout the book, she intersperses other details about her life, which help to paint the picture of her lifestyle as whole. She describes how many of the recipes were born out of “family and friends-dinner parties, cocktail parties, costume theme parties, outdoor movie screenings.” A salad recipe transforms from simply a recipe to a dish to be served around a bonfire, under the trees, in the company of loved ones. In between sections, she includes pictures of these scenes and of her house, including pictures of her expansive wooden porch beneath tall trees, her kitchen window, and her studio. The colors of these pictures are filled

with deep and warm greens, reds and oranges. There are pictures of dinner parties or gatherings on her porch, or friends around the dinner table drinking wine under string lights. She appeals to a group of people who long for her portrayed lifestyle, one with an abundance of genuine human interaction and that is more wholesome and in touch with nature. She gives a list of several ingredients that she keeps stocked in her pantry, giving readers insight not only into how to make a recipe, but how to have a life that's more like hers.

The visually appealing nature of her recipes makes them seem meant to entertain. She even says that most of the recipes can be served warm or room temperature, making them ideal for entertaining. The section devoted to cocktails also supports the idea that these recipes were developed for or meant for enjoying with friends at some sort of gathering or party.

“Eggplant ‘tacos’” on page 158 are an example of the style of her recipes. All the main ingredients are laid out visually on the page, and with a quick glance the reader can tell what is involved. By looking at the the finished dish on the opposite page, one could also pretty easily tell what steps are involved in the recipe. This is aided by the fact that all the recipes are very simple. This recipe has only 5 ingredients (eggplant, olive oil, salt, brie, cilantro), which is typical for most of the dishes. The ingredients are all very accessible and easily found in any grocery store or farmer's market. When she calls for “½-inch rounds” of eggplant, it's easy to observe visually from the sliced eggplant at the bottom of the page how big a ½-inch round is. The steps themselves are also straightforward, and visually as well as numerically separated on the page. They usually do not involve more cooking than roasting or sauteing. This recipe calls for roasting, and specifies 8 minutes on

each side at 400 degrees Fahrenheit, or until golden. The reader is expected to have enough basic knowledge of cooking to know that “roasting” means to put in an oven. It seems like she is targeting a demographic who is familiar with basic cooking but craving more inspiration for dishes that look interesting and beautiful, or for dishes that are simpler and more wholesome.

The recipe itself seems like an appetizer or finger food, again very suited to parties and entertaining. It looks interesting visually, which is very important as well when food is meant to be presented to others. She even states in her introduction that her goal is to share simple ideas to “make food look unique and attractive in addition to tasting good,” making it clear that the presentation of food is important to her, she is probably designing recipes meant to be served to others. This recipe’s easiness and minimal ingredients mean that it can be thrown together in little time, suggesting the idea that cooking is just a quick intermediate step that facilitates the real pleasures of enjoying friends, the outdoors, and life. In fact in most of the recipes which require dough or crust, she just says to use a store-bought version. In the beginning of the book, she says that these are things she often doesn’t have time to make from scratch. “If you are able, I encourage you to make them from scratch, but if buying pie dough will mean you’ll actually have time to make that galette, why not?” she explains, supporting her idea that the real value of cooking is what will be done with and who will enjoy the end result.

Besides the ingredients and finished product laid out on the page, the “eggplant tacos” recipe is also interesting because it (along with the other recipes) seems to be laid out on an actual table outdoors, ready to be served. It’s natural for the reader to assume that the dish is laid out on a table in Gleeson’s own house.

This arrangement serves several purposes. Firstly, the recipe seems more authentic, since it seems as if we are looking at proof that this dish is something Gleeson makes, serves and enjoys in her own house. Secondly, it adds to the recurring theme that these dishes exist to create happy memories. Since they are laid out on a serving platter on a table, it seems as if the picture was shot at a party or gathering, right before the company started digging in. Finally, the aesthetic of the finished product setup throughout all the recipes is consistently woodsy and rustic, which supports authenticity of the wholesome, natural, outdoorsy lifestyle that Gleeson portrays in the book.

The “eggplant tacos” recipe also includes what look like handwritten notes, and a handpainted title. The second step to ‘roast on an oiled baking sheet’ contains the handwritten addition ‘sprinkle with olive oil & salt’, and also modifies ‘8 min. each side at 400°F’ with ‘(or until golden)’. It makes the book seem more personal and authentic, as if the reader is reading Gleeson’s personal recipe journal in which she’s jotted down extra notes to herself and doodled little paintings of eggplants. The font as well as the fun, colloquial language (‘fold like a mini taco!’) might even give the reader the impression that he or she is almost in the kitchen with Gleeson cooking with her and hearing her voice read the parts that are handwritten.

Gleeson says she hopes her book will “find a nice balance between your coffee table and your kitchen counter and that you will be inspired to cook, eat, share and enjoy colorful, health food together.” Here she acknowledges a final audience of her book, which is simply people who want it on their coffee table, to

flip through it for aesthetic pleasure or inspiration. She is able to serve this audience with her attention to detail and striking, colorful visuals.

Throughout *The Forest Feast*, Gleeson presents vivid images that create a brilliant evocation of not only her recipes, but her entire lifestyle. She represents a return to an earlier, more innocent and childlike time, one with simpler, more wholesome foods and an abundance of real, enjoyable time spent with friends and family. Her book draws a group of people who long for this lifestyle, and her recipes provide inspiration for dishes to serve and share with those loved ones.

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