

Culture Club

By [Caroline Dipping](#) Saturday, October 17, 2009, 06:57 AM EDT



One traveled 17 miles. Another, nearly 9,000 miles. Two others, the globe.

Four local chefs have recently penned cookbooks about their cultures and the cultures of others. Each says their book represents years of research and meticulous crafting of recipes to be accessible to the foodies of San Diego.

Whether it is Khmer Salad Yum Khmer from Cambodia, Limerick Soup from Ireland, or Grilled Vegetables in Escabeche from Mexico, the recipes are written with Americans in mind. Here is a look at what each has to offer.

"Fresh Mexico: 100 Simple Recipes for True Mexican Flavor" by Marcela Valladolid

Born in San Diego and raised in Tijuana, Marcela Valladolid began cooking at an early age with her family before building a culinary resume that includes graduating from the Ritz Escoffier Cooking School in Paris and a gig at Bon Appetit magazine as a recipe editor. She is perhaps best known as a contestant on the 2004 reality show "The Apprentice: Martha Stewart," where she came in fourth.

Currently, she hosts "Relatos con Sabor" on Discovery en Espanol, runs her own catering company and teaches cooking to private groups in Tijuana and San Diego. The idea of writing a cookbook came to her 11 years ago while she was at Bon Appetit, but when it actually came down to tackling the work, she accomplished it in just a couple of months.

"A lot of the recipes are from my mom and aunt, and I've had them forever," said Valladolid from her San Diego home. "It is such a personal book, about what it's like growing up on the border with both cuisines, both sets of holidays and traditions and cultures."

Valladolid describes her culinary style as employing French and Asian techniques to create traditional Mexican flavors. She says the ingredients for the recipes in her book can be purchased at any supermarket or Whole Foods, and any home cook, from the neophyte to the veteran, can enjoy the recipes.

"The thing about this book is it attacks both audiences, per se," said Valladolid. "I've been a cooking instructor for 10 years. I know how to bring recipes down to the level where people with no experience can feel comfortable making them."

"For the experienced cook, this just takes Mexican cooking to a different level. It shows how to make things easier, fresher. I'm not making nachos with that yellow cheese out of a can, but experienced cooks can try the burrito filled with duck confit."

Valladolid's English-version cookbook launched in August and costs \$22.50. A Spanish-language version will appear in bookstores beginning Oct. 13.

"Flying Pans: Two Chefs, One World" by Bernard Guillas and Ron Oliver

"It's a big baby, about 4 pounds," said Bernard Guillas, the executive chef of the Marine Room, about his collaborative effort with sous chef Ron Oliver. "It could have been bigger. We planned on 185 pages, but at one point, we were near 500."

Guillas and Oliver began collaborating on their self-published travelogue/cookbook featuring more than 200 recipes about two years ago after Guillas returned from a trip to Singapore. Looking at a world map in the chef's office, Oliver pointed out that Guillas had visited close to 40 countries, and he himself had been to at least 20.

Thus, after some trial and error with a design concept, a cookbook was born.

Gorgeous full-page photos, painstakingly styled by the chefs and shot by renowned food photographer Gregory Bertolini, accompany each recipe. Recipe testing was a homegrown affair, with Barona Casino chefs Dean Thomas and Jim Phillips testing many of the chapters, as well as friends and students from a local culinary school.

Most of the recipes are not for beginners, Guillas admits, but they are for people who love to cook. One chapter, called Out of a Bind, details substitutions for potentially hard-to-find ingredients. Still, he insists, there are a lot of recipes that are very easy to execute, and the home cook is given the option of using just one component of a recipe and omitting the formula for accompaniments such as a sauce or a presentation suggestion.

"I think traveling and discovering other cultures really enriches your soul. Every time I traveled, I fell in love," Guillas said. "The easiest way to put it is if you love food, you will love the book."

Guillas and Oliver's book costs \$34.99 and arrives in bookstores Nov. 1. Preorders for autographed copies are now being taken at [twochefsoneworld.com](#).

"The Elements of Life: A Contemporary Guide to Thai Recipes and Traditions for Healthier Living" by Su-Mei Yu

Owner of Saffron Thai Chicken and author of two other cookbooks, Su-Mei Yu was inspired to write her latest tome by talking to and cooking with old women in Thailand during her twice-annual visits for the past 24 years.

Writing a comprehensive book about the age-old Thai philosophy of diet and health involving meals planned around a person's "home element" (earth, water, wind or fire) and other factors such as the weather and time of day was no easy feat for Yu. Her publishers sent her back to the drawing board three times before they felt she had a book as accessible to someone in Bangkok as in the United States.

"To translate something very culturally imprinted and explain it to someone who has no clue whatsoever about what this is about was a very complicated and difficult process," said Yu. "It took me five years to do the research and writing and rewriting."

Over the years, Yu has cooked with many women in their homes. She eschewed for the most part cooking with professional chefs, opting for people who learned about food as medicine from their mothers and nurturing their families not from books but from years of in-the-trenches cooking.

Yu's book (with beautiful photographs mostly from Thailand) contains more than 150 recipes, a mix of complex and easier-to-follow formulas. There are even recipes for spa treatments and what to consume if suffering from slight aches and pains. San Diegans should be able to find most of the ingredients in her book from various stores such as Whole Foods, Asian grocers and farmers markets.

"If you don't even know how to make toast, you are going to have problems," Yu said of her recipes. "If you have done some cooking, you can manage it."

"People have to decide to make the time. Cooking does take time. I can't do Trader Joe's. It's as simple as that."

Yu's book costs \$35 and will be available Oct. 20 in bookstores and on [Amazon.com](#).

BUTTERCUP SQUASH NECTAR WITH SPICED RUM, ACAI BERRIES, FROMAGE BLANC SQUASH NECTAR

2- to 3-pound kabocha squash, halved, seeded

2 tablespoons brown sugar

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

1/2 cup minced shallots

1/8 teaspoon each ground cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, cayenne pepper

1 cup dry vermouth

2 quarts vegetable stock

1 stalk lemongrass, split

2 tablespoons maple syrup

1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger

1/4 cup heavy cream

Sea salt and freshly ground white pepper to taste

PRESENTATION

1/4 cup acai berries

1/4 cup apple juice

3 tablespoons vanilla spiced rum

6 teaspoons fromage blanc

6 sprigs chervil

Makes 6 servings

For the nectar: Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Place squash on baking sheet, cut side up. Sprinkle flesh with brown sugar. Bake 35 minutes or until tender. Remove from oven. Cool. Scoop flesh from shell. Set aside. Melt butter in a large pot over medium heat. Add shallots. Cook 2 minutes without browning, stirring often. Add cinnamon, clove, nutmeg and cayenne pepper. Cook 1 minute, stirring often. Pour in vermouth. Bring to simmer. Add squash, stock and lemongrass. Simmer 25 minutes. Discard lemongrass. Puree soup in blender until smooth. Strain through sieve into pot. Whisk in maple syrup, ginger and cream. Bring back to simmer. Season with salt and pepper.

For the presentation: In small bowl, soak acai berries in apple juice for 10 minutes. Ladle nectar in warm soup cup. Drizzle with rum. Spoon fromage blanc in center. Garnish with acai berries and chervil.

— "Flying Pans: Two Chefs, One World" by Bernard Guillas and Ron Oliver, Cabin Fever Press, \$34.99)

Caroline Dipping writes about food for The San Diego Union-Tribune.
