

Book Review

What Einstein Told His Cook 2. The Sequel, by Robert L. Wolke, with recipes by Marlene Parrish (W.W. Norton & Co., 2005) 444 pp., ISBN 0-393-05869-7; \$25.95 hard cover)

Reviewed by Dennis J. Sardella
Department of Chemistry, Merkert Chemist

Take equal parts of recipe and science, leaven with a dash of terrible puns, and stir them smoothly into a base of questions and answers about the mysteries of the kitchen and what do you get? The recipe for Robert Wolke's thoroughly enjoyable (if rather bland-looking) book, *What Einstein Told His Cook 2. The Sequel*. Like its predecessor, *What Einstein Told His Cook: Kitchen Science Explained*, "Einstein 2" is based on material taken from Wolke's seven-year tenure writing the *Washington Post's* "Food 101" column and is presented in a question-and-answer format, in ten chapters devoted, respectively, to drinks (both alcoholic and non-), dairy products, vegetables, fruits, grains, sea foods, meats, spices, "galley gear", and (mostly) sweets.

Wolke, an emeritus professor of chemistry at University of Pittsburgh, debunks a range of dubious claims and foodie folklore, for instance, the idea that adding salt or vinegar before boiling eggs will prevent them from cracking, that "light" olive oil contains fewer calories than "regular" olive oil, and in the process, introduces a number of chemical principles. In addition, for those who want to go a bit more deeply into the scientific background, the book is peppered (no pun intended) with what Wolke calls "Sidebar Science", boxed discussions in the margins, covering such topics as the compressibility of cork (p. 55), enzymes (p. 13), "electron kidnappers" (p. 49), micronutrients (p. 125), fatty acid sidechains (p. 181), osmosis (p. 188), nitrites (p. 285), salvation (p. 316), capsaicin (p. 338), redox reactions (p. 378), and the difference between conduction, convection, and radiation (p. 403).

I cannot guarantee that everyone will like this book. Other than its cover, it is rather bland in its appearance, lacking visual impact with diagrams drawn in grayscale. It features none of the luscious color photos of beautifully plated meals and fertile countryside that are the stock-in-trade of contemporary cookbooks, and is certainly not likely to leap off

the shelf at the prospective buyer. Indeed, its principal attractive point to the person who happens across it while prowling through the local Barnes & Noble or Borders is probably its provocative title (which of course, has absolutely nothing to do with the contents).

A small, but probably vocal, minority of serious (or perhaps better, “solemn”, in the sense of Russell Baker’s distinction) foodies will not find the intense and detailed discussion of obscure food items and recipe optimization (“the small nuances of how to improve a particular recipe or tweak an ingredient to bring out its fullest potential”, to quote one of them) they long for, while some scientists will look down their noses dismissively at what one person derided as its third grade presentation of science (though personally, I would be thrilled to think that American third-graders – let alone members of the general public – are learning about osmotic pressure, how differing molecular structures determine the properties of different classes of carbohydrates, or the difference between hemoglobin and oxyhemoglobin, but that’s just me!). So, it is true that *What Einstein Told His Cook* is neither high-end science nor *cordon bleu* cuisine, but I found it enjoyable – a kind of hors d’oeuvre selection that I could pick through at leisure, knowing that I would learn a thing or two while smiling at Wolke’s wit. As G.K. Chesterton once said that, “If a thing is worth doing, it’s worth doing badly,” though in no way has Wolke done it badly.

I never did find out what Einstein told his cook, although, since he once did assert that “Nothing will benefit human health and increase the chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet”, it may be that he might perhaps have advised her to skip chapter 7 (“A Carnival for Carnivores”).

All in all, *What Einstein Told His Cook* made enjoyable light reading, and you might consider reading it yourself, and perhaps recommending it to a nonscientist friend who might otherwise be put off by the prospect of actually reading a book that deals with chemistry.