



# Elemental Epicurean

Marrying healthy food and delicious eating is Dana Jacobi's passion

It can't be an easy task to pinpoint the dozen foods that can provide us with the micronutrients we need to ward off disease and optimize our health—and also taste great. Not only is there an abundance of foodstuffs from which to choose, but scientific reports often contradict one another and leave us wondering if last week's "miracle" food will be on next week's list of foods to avoid.

Indeed, it takes someone who is passionate about food, who is a meticulous researcher and who has a good dose of common sense to guide us toward those edibles that are both nutritious and delicious. Luckily, Dana Jacobi fits the bill, and her book, *12 Best Foods Cookbook: Over 200 Recipes Featuring the 12 Healthiest Foods* (2005, Rodale Books, \$21.95) presents her findings in a manner that is both informative and entertaining. That's no surprise, though, given her winding path to gastronomic expertise.

A self-described "child of the '60s," Dana Jacobi grew up in a family where good food was an obsession. With a mother who enjoyed sophisticated dishes yet was a devotee of Adelle Davis, Jacobi learned that "good food" meant edibles that were both good for you and deliciously prepared.

From that early start, Jacobi says, "I kind of went my own way, piecing together the things that seemed to be sound." Through reading, observation and talking to experts, Jacobi indulged her interest in food. When she was in her 20's, Jacobi took advantage of an opportunity of a lifetime: a letter of introduction to Alain Senderens at France's L'Archestrate restaurant. Of her experience apprenticing with the nouvelle cuisine chef for three months, Jacobi fondly recalls, "I was there at a golden moment. Eberhard Muller and several European top chefs were all working there. I got to learn from a master and people who would become masters." When she returned to the States, Jacobi says, "I looked at marrying great cooking with great ingredients, but with an American style, which became totally eclectic."

Her career continued to take twists and turns, but she always returned to food. "I'm of a generation where things started opening up for women," Jacobi says. "Business always appealed to me." She found an opportunity at Revlon, where she began as a secretary for the cosmetics firm. With time, she became the Director of Marketing for Chanel and was instrumental in first positioning the brand in the U.S. Eventually, she says, "I wanted to get back into food, and out of cosmetics." That desire led to a stint at General Foods, where she marketed a gourmet food line and to a position at another company, where she created and marketed a line of specialty sauces.

Reflecting on those years, Jacobi says that she always managed to do what she loved. "Every job has been exciting, or the ones that have been drudgery have been an opportunity to learn something." She encourages everyone to hold out for his or her vision, saying, "The first 20 years, I didn't realize it was my vision—it just kept happening." Although she's written three other cookbooks, has penned a weekly food column and teaches seminars to chefs in training, in some ways *12 Best Foods Cookbook* is the culmination of the eclectic path she's taken.

"I've always been interested in the health side of food," Jacobi says. "Almost every day we hear how certain foods can keep us healthier." Yet, even armed with the proper knowledge, she ran into the same dilemma that we all face when we try to eat a nutritious diet. "I wanted to make those calories and meals count the most. I would stand there in the grocery store and wonder, should I get the kale? Or the mustard greens? It started to get paralyzing. Ideally, you should eat something

## Dana Jacobi's 12 Best Foods

In *12 Best Foods Cookbook* (2005, Rodale Books, \$21.95) Dana Jacobi identifies the dozen foods that meet her criteria for maximum vitality, versatility and convenience. Here's what makes them special:

**Black beans** ● Help to lower cholesterol, reduce cancer risk and combat free radicals

**Blueberries** ● Best anti-oxidant among fresh fruits and vegetables and may improve memory and coordination

**Broccoli** ● Has cancer-fighting and anti-bacterial properties and can help prevent cataracts and macular degeneration

**Chocolate** ● The dark stuff has the highest anti-oxidant properties of any food and can boost "good" cholesterol

**Oats** ● Fiber lowers risk of heart disease and may help stabilize mood

**Onions** ● Contain anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties, and sulfur compounds help combat heart disease

**Salmon** ● Omega-3 fatty acids can reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke, and can help with autoimmune diseases

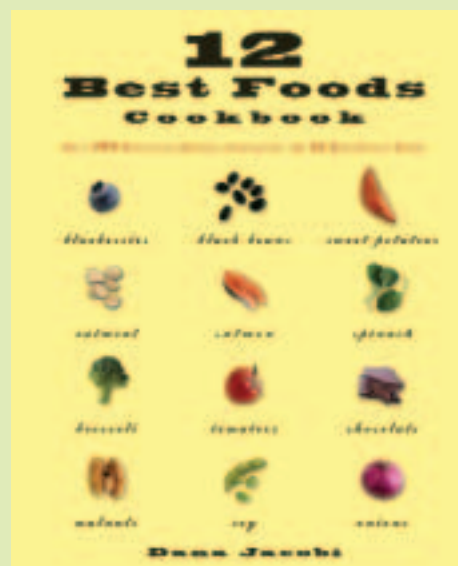
**Soy** ● Can reduce cholesterol and blood pressure, protect and maintain bone strength and possibly protect against cancer

**Spinach** ● Folate helps protect against cancers and may reduce risk of stroke

**Sweet potatoes** ● The low glycemic index ranking help avoid insulin resistance

**Tomatoes** ● Protects against cancer and heart disease; may help prevent osteoporosis, skin damage and macular degeneration

**Walnuts** ● Polyunsaturated fats help reduce LDL and increase HDL cholesterol; amino acids help keep arteries relaxed



cruciferous each day. But, how do I eat it that often without going nuts?”

Her plight led her to start thinking and reading, and Jacobi came to the conclusion that the secret might be to focus in on certain foods that were rich in micronutrients, simple enough to remember and versatile enough to keep boredom at bay. She knew, for example, that legumes are good, and that kidney beans and black beans deliver the most fiber, phytonutrients and antioxidants. “If I’m going to pick one, I can do so much with black beans—Tex-Mex, Asian, Mediterranean food.” So, black beans made the cut on her 12-best list, along with blueberries, broccoli, chocolate, oats, onions, salmon, soy, spinach, sweet potatoes, tomatoes and walnuts.

Jacobi says that she kept three things in mind when making the decision to include certain foods on her list. The first she terms “vitality,” or the various nutritional benefits that the food contains. “Then I looked at the convenience factor,” she says. With hectic lifestyles and limited time for shopping, “If you remember these 12 foods, you’ll know your family is getting the nutrition they need.” Convenience also means ease of preparation. “The truth is that, on a busy night, broccoli’s a lot easier to deal with than Brussels sprouts.”

Her final criterion was flavor. “The word that filled it out for me was ‘voluptuousness.’ Food that appeals to all of the senses - food that looks good, tastes good and has textures that people enjoy.”

For Jacobi, including these foods on your menu doesn’t mean oatmeal every morning for breakfast or a nightly dinner of salmon and spinach. There are lots of things you can do with tomatoes, for example, “without announcing a dish that has tomatoes in it.” Likewise, there are different ways to prepare spinach. “You can steam it, sauté it or boil it, and you will get a different result each way,” Jacobi says. “Most people like sweet potatoes; they just don’t know what to do with them. You can season them in so many ways for variety—Moroccan style, or use thyme for a Mediterranean flavor so they can go with roast chicken.”

Jacobi thought outside of the box when developing recipes for her book. She says she was “deliberately a little outrageous,” when coming up with Spinach Strudel and Oat Cranachan with Raspberries. “That’s based on a centuries-old Scottish dessert that involves oats and Scotch whiskey and whipped cream. With mine, you almost get an oatty-tasting mousse, served with berries.



## Shrimp with Cherry Tomatoes and Feta

Plump cherry tomatoes, sautéed just until their skins crack, are the stars of this Greek-accented dish. The large cherry tomatoes, also called cocktail tomatoes, that come in a net bag are best. Their flavor is worth the premium you pay. If you buy shelled shrimp, this dish is ready to cook in 5 minutes.

- 2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 3/4 pound medium shrimp, shelled
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 (12-oz.) bag cherry tomatoes on the vine
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh oregano, or 1 teaspoon dried
- 1/4 cup dry white wine, or fat-free, reduced-sodium chicken broth
- 3 tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 2 tablespoons crumbled reduced-fat feta cheese
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

Heat the oil in a medium skillet over medium-high heat. Add the shrimp and stir with a wooden spoon until they just lose their raw color, 1 to 2 minutes.

Add the garlic, tomatoes, oregano, and wine or broth. Cook, using a spoon to roll the tomatoes around, until most of the liquid has boiled off, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the parsley and cheese, and cook 1 minute longer, stirring occasionally. Season with salt and pepper, and serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings with 154 calories, 5g fat, 1g saturated fat, 19g protein, 5g carbohydrates, 1g fiber per serving

Recipe from *12 Best Foods Cookbook* by Dana Jacobi (c) 2005 by Rodale, Inc. Photo by Maren Caruso. Permission granted by Rodale, Inc., Emmaus, PA 18098.



## Key Lime Tartlets

Bottled key lime juice turns the creamy filling in these phyllo tartlets a lovely golden shade. Use a microplane grater to shred the lime zest for them and everyone will think this is the latest creation from the best pastry shop in town. Say they are made with soy, and they won't believe you.

- 1/2 package soft regular tofu (about 1 3/4 cups)
- 1/4 cup light cream cheese
- 2/3 cup confectioners' sugar
- 3 tablespoons fresh or bottled key lime juice
- 2 1/2 teaspoons grated lime zest, divided
- Pinch of salt
- 4 phyllo sheets, whole wheat or regular
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

Break the tofu into pieces and squeeze out about half the. It should resemble cottage cheese. Place tofu in a food processor, add the cream cheese and sugar, and whirl to a smooth puree. Add the lime juice, 1 1/2 teaspoons of the zest and salt; whirl to blend.

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Lay out 1 sheet of the phyllo with the long side facing you. Brush with melted butter. Top with another sheet of phyllo and brush again with butter. Repeat, ending with the fourth phyllo sheet brushed with butter. Cut the layered dough into 6 rectangles. Fit the dough into the cups of a 6-cup muffin tin. Bake 12 minutes, or until golden brown with dark tips. Cool 2 minutes in the tin, lift out the phyllo cups, and cool completely on a wire

Scotland is but one of her inspirations, with Morocco and Sicily being dear to her heart. The New York City native says that both the food of Morocco and creative richness of the culture appeal to her. "Arab art is wonderful, and even in inexpensive restaurants, your eyes just feast on the mosaics on the walls. When I came back to New York after two weeks, it felt like going from color TV to black and white."

Jacobi is especially fond of Regalealy, a winery and cooking school in Sicily. "They have preserved old ways," she says. "They raise wheat, make their own bread, raise sheep, make ricotta cheese, and their wines win awards all of the time." She also finds inspiration from losing herself in the history of the land. "When you're in parts of Sicily, you don't know what century you're in."

When she's firmly planted in twenty-first century New York City, though, Jacobi has two addictions: knitting and reading. "I'm constantly working on several knitting projects at one time. I find working with colors and textures of yarn very therapeutic." Jacobi belongs to a book club and devours murder mysteries, but especially appreciates well-written works. "I recently read two of Pete Hamill's non-fiction books. The writing was so good in Downtown that it was like eating a great piece of chocolate. So satisfying."

Jacobi plans to continue living a satisfying life. "I want to keep going in the direction of bringing things that are good for us together with things we enjoy." If anyone has the unique set of skills necessary to marry the two, it's Dana Jacobi. ♦

rack. If not filling immediately, arrange the cups on a plate, cover with foil, and set aside for up to 24 hours.

To assemble, place the phyllo cups on individual dessert plates. Spoon 1/3 cup of the key lime filling into each cup, sprinkle the remaining 1 teaspoon grated lime zest over the cream, and serve.

Makes 6 servings, with 201 calories, 9g fat, 4g saturated fat, 7g protein, 26g carbohydrates, 0 g fiber per serving.

The filling for these creamy tartlets keeps, tightly covered, in the refrigerator for up to 4 days.

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