

# peaches as performance

Masumoto family mixes **food** with **culture** in new cookbook

by *Jefferson Beavers*

photos by *Staci Valentine*, courtesy *Ten Speed Press*

On her 21st birthday, Nikiko Masumoto gave herself a gift: a tattoo of a peach on her ankle.

"The very first day after I got it," she says, "I looked down at my ankle and said, 'Oh! Why weren't you there all along?'"

It's impossible for the 27-year-old performance artist and farm apprentice to separate her identity from the pinkish-yellow stone fruit. The Masumoto family has farmed peaches and other fruits and vegetables on an 80-acre farm in Del Rey, southeast of Fresno, for four generations.

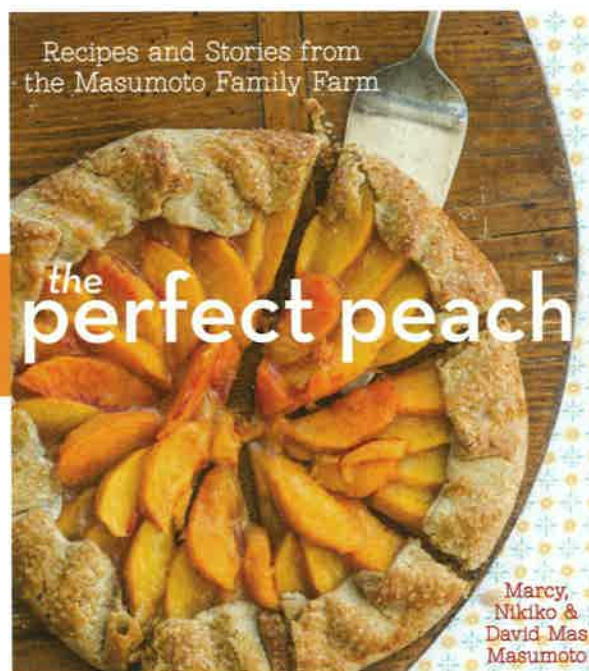
Nikiko joins her father, David Mas Masumoto, and her mother, Marcy Masumoto, in sharing their peach love through their new literary cookbook, "The Perfect Peach," which they wrote together.

The book – packed with an equal measure of family stories and mouth-watering recipes from the Masumoto Family Farm – delivers lovingly chosen selections about peach beverages, savory peach dishes, sweet peach desserts, and peach preserves, as well as an educational and personal "peach primer" that could only come from one of the Central Valley's most well-known farm families.

For the Masumotos, delivering a single peach from their farm to your table has become like a time-capsule performance, and the peach itself is the time capsule. In this way, Nikiko says, "The Perfect Peach" cookbook becomes the script of a grand peach performance, open to each cook's creative interpretations.

Eating a peach, she says, is a sensory experience.

"There's drama, there's expectation, there's closure, there's loss. The peach itself is like a play. It is alive while you are consuming it and eating it, and then it's gone. Just like theater, it is born and then dies as soon as it's over."



The peach as performance is not the book's only metaphor. The authors organized the main sections thematically: thirst and sweat (beverages and stories about work); at the table (savory dishes and family farming); sweet dreams (sweet dishes and peach pleasure); and harvest memories (preserves and legacy). They worked hard to strike a balance between the literary aspects and the cooking, Nikiko says.

Each recipe, for example, starts with a headnote by either Marcy or Nikiko, explaining the dish's backstory. Additional short essays – most by Mas, but some also by Marcy and Nikiko – are then sprinkled throughout.

So how, then, should a "literary cookbook" be read? From start to finish, like a novel? Or one recipe at a time, like a traditional cookbook? Mother and daughter agree that different readers will have different tastes.

Marcy says: "I have never read a cookbook from cover to cover, and I have a lot of cookbooks! But I think this book does lend itself to that. It's more than a recipe book."

Nikiko says: "My hope is that people can sit down and read this on a leisurely afternoon. And also cook with it, get it dirty, get it sticky, full with flour and butter stains and peach juice."

The Masumotos tried to make their recipes



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reflect and celebrate who they are as a multicultural and multi-generational Central Valley family. Dishes range from the simple (peach margaritas, pork chops with grilled peaches, and peach cobbler) to the elaborate (summer Thai shrimp with noodles and peach salad, rolled pork loin with peaches inside, and orange-peach phyllo cups), and the book also includes extensive advice on preserves, freezing and canning.

Marcy sees most of the cookbook's dishes as everyday food, bistro-style California cuisine from an eclectic range of the family's Japanese-American and German-American roots, and also the region's countless ethnic food influences, including Mexican, Vietnamese, Armenian, and more.

But those wonderful, diverse flavors can also come with challenges. Nikiko says that the issue of race runs throughout the book in subtle but very present ways. The family faces the issue within the farming industry, as they toil side by side with many Mexican farmworkers who have become their friends, but they also face it in their kitchen.

For example, in the headnote to her recipe for panko-fried peaches, Nikiko identifies herself as "hapa," a term typically used to describe mixed-race Japanese Americans. Nikiko calls the label "deliciously slippery," and she prefers to think of it not as being half Japanese and half German, but

rather as being both simultaneously.

"I walk in the world not with a fraction at my belly button but as a whole being," she says. "I have shifting understandings depending on what context I'm in, but the term allows me to be whole as opposed to segmented."

For another example, in the headnote to Nikiko's recipe for peach pickles, she connects a family trip to Kumamoto, Japan, where her paternal great-grandparents are from, with her thoughts of her family's experiences on the farm here in Fresno.

"I love this place," Nikiko says of the Central Valley. "I feel fortunate that I feel very rooted here. At the same time, just a couple generations back, my great-grandmother, a Japanese immigrant who worked this land – she lived in the same room that I live in now – she could not own land because of explicitly racist land-owning laws in California...Her ghost is absolutely weaved throughout this book and when I cook with peaches."

The questions arise for Nikiko on her mother's side of the family, too. In the headnote to her recipe for peach shortcake, she writes that she didn't have a perfect relationship with her maternal grandmother. Part of that might have been distance – Marcy's family lived in Wisconsin – but part of that may have been tied to race.

"I have learned a lot from her via my mother," Nikiko says of her maternal grandmother, who passed away in 2011. "Even though we did not have a very open or frequent dialogue, I do remember the first strawberry shortcake I had at her house, and that is a joyful memory."

Marcy acknowledges that her daughter didn't have much of an opportunity to spend time around her maternal grandmother, but she thinks it's a deep compliment that her daughter is thinking about her elders when she is cooking.

"I think food is all about communing, anyhow," Marcy says. "So whether you're together physically or not, it's a nice way to connect."

Those connections in the kitchen, Marcy believes, can be a real blessing for everyone, especially when they're connected to culture.

"I think it makes me a richer, stronger person," she says.