

BRAINCAKE

By Anne Brown with Barbara Schultz

At the door of the house, she sighed and reached for the knob. She let herself in, shutting out the dull pearl of the afternoon fog. She felt tired. There would be another gathering. She must prepare herself, the house, and refreshments—the miles of recipes she never finished because the guests were never finished. Politely, they would ask again and again for more and different dishes, endlessly consuming, complimenting her on each one. Again, she sighed, and shut the door of the dark old house, and once her eyes became used to the grim, brown half-light of the room, the familiar halls became apparent.

The way to the house's great kitchen was dim and almost labyrinthian, but she made her way easily and soon found herself in the house's only modern looking room. Here, every convenience was available to her. The warehouse sized room abounded with Cuisinarts, microwaves, coffee grinders, espresso machines, wine corking and uncorking devices, and an unrecountable number of tools like egg whisks, wooden spoons and salad tongs. The cabinets and refrigerators were brimming with the ingredients her recipes required. Spinach pasta, zucchini pasta, carrot pasta, tarragon and capers, green pepper corns, pine nuts, sun dried tomatoes and peppers, chicken breasts, cornish game hens, salmon and sushi, veal, proscuitto, pannetta, jalapeno pepper jelly, miniature summer, pesto brie cheese, cilantro, wild rice, mussels, kiwi, raspberries, apricots, mangos, heavy cream, olive oil, sesame oil, truffles, sugar peas, red peppers, black beans, tahini, chick peas, prawns, soft shell crabs, mustard seed, sweet 'n rough mustard, hot 'n sweet mustard, dijon mustard, and snails. And there were the chest high piles of loaves of French bread, wrapped like cords of wood and stacked along the wall, and the dusty, dark coolers for the wines and liquors she must match with their suitable edible mates.

She wasn't sure where the recipes came from. None of the dishes reminded her of foods she'd eaten as a child, yet in a small way she sensed they were her mother's recipes. And she had to follow them implicitly. Each ingredient must be measured precisely and added at the specific moment the recipe dictated. She began to take stock of the evening's menu, lining up ingredients on one of the long oak tables, measuring and melting and blanching and pureeing until she could hear that the guests had begun to enter the dining room. Hurriedly, she wound her way back through the maze of brown halls to her dressing room, and as she chose the evening's attire, the guests' conversation could be heard. She listened with annoyance to their chatter. At least three of the men were called Jeff. Jeff had been wind surfing, and Jeff had seen the Impressionist Exhibit and Jeff thought the Zin was too dry, and Jeff thought the movie was very surreal . . . it reminded him of *Eraser Head*. They were all so predictable, so comfortable . . . and so cerebral.

The dining room was sort of medieval—menacing, heavy and dark. Huge, spiny metal light fixtures shed a dull, orange glow on the throngs of tweeded or high heeled guests. Meals were served at a black, knotty table, fifty feet long and ten feet wide, around which were arranged forty black, knotty stools. The whole arrangement was unsettling, yet her guests mingled easily—networking, as they called it—apparently adaptable to their grim environment. Soon she was serving the meal, smiling feebly and nodding with weak, pretended interest, irritated at the guests' inability to discern a blank smile from a genuine one. And again, soon, it was time for her to prepare dessert.

In the kitchen, she located the correct recipe and read softly aloud to herself the ingredients as she removed each item from its shelf. "½ cup dried apricots. 2 cups wheat flour. 3 brown eggs. 1 cup diced tomatoes . . ." She smiled. "½ pound cooked, fresh spinach." She began to laugh. Where had this recipe come from? She knew this was surely her mother's recipe, and she felt well pleased imagining her guests politely requesting another slice of the lovely apricot tomato spinach cake. She read the following ingredient, which was 1/8th cook's brain. Her brain. Her brain? She stood still for a moment, attempting to come to grips with this new development. An apricot tomato spinach brain cake. She added the brain, though she was not sure how . . . and stirred the repulsive mixture her ministrations had produced, orange and red bleeding into the murky grey and green. A blend of reactions confused her. Irritation. Why must she give up part of her brain for these annoying and shallow guests? Amusement. She delighted in imagining the guests' expressions when confronted with this hideous and frightening pastry. Vindication. Of course. It was perfect that she should clandestinely force feed them part of her brain. The more she thought about it, as she poured the slimy, lumpy mess into a greased bundt pan, as she smelled the fruits, vegetables and her own brain baking, the more she liked the idea.