

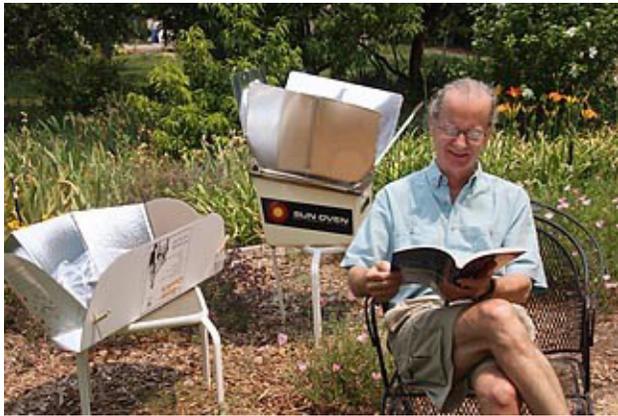
Carbon-free cuisine:

Palkovic an expert on high-tech writing and low-tech cooking

By Jeff Hudson | *Enterprise staff writer* | July 14, 2008 14:56

Writer (and electrical engineer) Rick Palkovic is co-author of what many people regard as the best book of recipes for solar-heated cuisine. 'Cooking with Sunshine,' written with Lorraine Anderson, contains 150 tasty recipes that can be simmered, baked or boiled without charcoal, electricity or gas.

'It's the no-carbon cooking alternative,' Palkovic quipped during a recent interview at his Davis home.



And in the world of software and computers, Palkovic is known as a talented tech writer, currently working for Sun Microsystems (a company he first contracted with in the 1980s).

Palkovic's specialties — food, and technology — are more closely linked than some might think, particularly from a writer's point of view.

'The commonality, of course, is that there's a lot of procedure involved in writing a cookbook. It has to be clean and concise — direc-

tions you can follow.' And those traits are virtues in technical writing as well.

Palkovic became a successful tech writer in the 1980s. He was living in Palo Alto at the time.

'But I was priced out of the housing market. And I realized I was spending my free time driving to the mountains, not the coast.'

Palkovic happened on Davis ('I like college towns,' he said), and noticed Village Homes — a neighborhood built during the late 1970s and 1980s with solar energy in mind. He moved here in 1990.

As a well-connected tech writer, leaving Silicon Valley was something of a risk. 'Other than a short-term contract in Sacramento, I've never had work within 100 miles of Davis. It was kind of a step off the cliff at the time,' Palkovic said.

But the technology connection also fueled Palkovic's transition to solar cooking. 'After experiencing a summer here, Lorraine and I realized it was silly to waste all that solar energy, so we got into it.'

Palkovic and Anderson built their first solar oven from two boxes (originally made for shipping computer monitors). It cost a total of \$13, and lasted for years. Then they started experimenting, gradually building their repertoire of recipes.

By 1994, they'd compiled enough good material to write a book, which they self-published under the title 'Cooking With Sunshine: The Lazy Cook's Guide to Solar Cuisine.' The book also described how to build your own solar cooker, and where to buy one ready-made (from places like Solar Cookers International, in Sacramento).

Palkovic and Anderson tried to get mainstream New York publishers interested, without success. 'They didn't know what to make of it. And they didn't like the 'lazy cook' line. They thought it had a connotation,' Palkovic said.

Co-author Anderson eventually moved to Corvallis, Ore., where she works as a free-lance writer and editor.

Then, in 2005, The New York Times published an article about solar cooking (under the bubbly headline 'Sunny Side Up') that included a recipe from the Anderson/Palkovic cookbook.

'Which suddenly made us legitimate,' Palkovic recalls. 'We started hearing from New York publishers.'

An updated version of the cookbook — under the less lazy-sounding title 'Cooking With Sunshine – The Complete Guide to Solar Cuisine with 150 Easy Sun-Cooked Recipes' — was released by the Avalon Publishing Group in 2006.

The updated cookbook has a Web site — www.cookingwithsunshine.com — and is available online and through bookstores, and can be found in public libraries.

Palkovic, all the while, has enjoyed a career in tech writing, though not many of his neighbors in Davis are familiar with his accomplishments.

Tech writing is a specialized form of writing, somewhat distinct from journalism, fiction and most nonfiction.

'The technical writer, in my experience, is an advocate for the use of some software or appliance, or whatever it may be,' Palkovic said. 'And a lot of bugs in the product don't really appear until you start writing about it. Writers are not always well received by the engineering community, because you uncover usability issues that they're not always happy to hear about,' he said.

Tech writing has also changed dramatically since Palkovic started in the 1980s. Back then, Sun Microsystems 'shipped what they called a docubox' with many products. 'It was a rack of paper about 4 feet wide, documenting the entire Unix system. And of course now it's all online,' Palkovic said.

Tech writers don't necessarily have a broad public audience. 'But if you deliver what you say you are going to do, you're a hero,' Palkovic said. 'Apparently, because a lot of people don't.'

'Right now, I'm writing a lot for the developer community, because a computer manufacturer is only as popular as the software that's written for the platform. And so my job is to interest developers in developing programs for the Sun Microsystems platform. Which is the Java platform, actually.'

'The stuff I write fits between marketing and engineering,' Palkovic said. 'I can make claims about the product, but they have to be substantiated. Because the people who are reading (my work)

have Ph.D.s in computer science. And you can't blow smoke at them.' A good tech writer is something of 'an informed advocate.'

Through it all, Palkovic has continued to cook with sunshine. And he offered these tips, after more than 15 years of experience.



'Things like bread and root vegetables require more heat. You want to make sure your solar cooker is out between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., when the sun is strongest. It's better to start fish and chicken, which you can overdo, later in the day.'

'Solar cookers are great for rice. Sometimes I'll put frozen chicken parts over half a cup of rice with maybe a little water or broth. But usually the chicken produces enough moisture to cook the rice.'

'People who start solar cooking usually turn into enthusiasts!' Palkovic said.

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Vegetable tofu pilaf

Here's a sample recipe from 'Cooking With Sunshine' by Lorraine Anderson and Rick Palkovic. This very easy one-pot meal is for those days when you're short on time. Serve with a fresh fruit salad.

Yield: 4 servings

Ingredients:

1/2 cup olive oil

1 large onion, finely chopped

2 cups vegetable broth

1 cup bulgur (cracked wheat)

4 cups coarsely chopped fresh vegetables, such as carrots, zucchini, cabbage, bok choy, asparagus, or sugar snap peas

1/2 cup sliced almonds or walnut pieces

2 tablespoons lemon juice

2 teaspoons chopped fresh oregano or 1/2 teaspoon dried

2 teaspoons chopped fresh dill or 1/2 teaspoon dried

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon black pepper

8 ounces firm tofu, drained and cut into 1/2 inch cubes

Putting it together:

Warm the oil in a 2-quart saucepan on the stove over medium heat.

Add the onion and saut? for about 5 minutes, until golden. Add the broth, raise the heat to high, and bring it to a boil.

Place the bulgur, other vegetables, nuts, lemon juice, oregano, dill, salt and pepper in a dark 2-quart casserole. Pour the onions and broth over them and mix well.

Cover and bake for at least 2 to 3 hours in the solar cooker, until the vegetables are tender and all the broth has been absorbed. Gently stir in the tofu cubes and bake another 30 minutes to warm through.