

Book Review: 'How I Learned to Cook - Culinary Educations From the World's Greatest Chefs'

by *Caroline Dipping*

"How I Learned to Cook: Culinary Educations From the World's Greatest Chefs" edited by Kimberly Witherspoon and Peter Meehan; Bloomsbury; 303 pages; \$24.95.

Do not be fooled by the title of this anthology of essays from 40 top chefs from around the globe. These are love stories.

The chefs - Boulud, Colicchio, Danko, Goin, Hazan, Morimoto and Richard, to name just a few - hearken back to "ah-ha!" experiences decades ago that transformed their mere mortal attitude about cooking and eating into the culinary passion and pursuits they are renowned for today.

Before they were kitchen gods, they were apprentices, snack bar hamburger flippers and soup slingers. Their remembrances are tinged with humor, disgust, terror, awe, head-scratching incredulity and genuine fondness.

These recollections are as disparate as they are similar. No one wrote of learning to cook at his mother's knee, yet many recalled learning in the lap of a formidable chef who, more often than not, had a wee bit of a rage problem or a touch of eccentricity.

In Daniel Boulud's account as a 14-year-old apprentice in Paul Bocuse's restaurant in Lyon, France, a minion cook leaving a bottle of lemonade on a shelf not designated for such a purpose was enough to push the famed Bocuse into a towering rage. In a food flinging snit worthy of a scene in "Animal House," Bocuse hurled a case of lemonade to the ground, followed by a case of beer, then cabbages, celery, carrots and anything else the angry god could get his hands on. The lesson learned? Only the chef can make a mess in his kitchen.

More than a few painted all-too-vivid pictures of the behind-the-scenes action in restaurant kitchens. Some are so descriptive you might seriously question whether to dine out ever again.

In his essay, "The Noodle Whisperer," chef David Chang of New York noodle shop Momofuku recalled his first job in a ramen shop in Tokyo. His "mentor" was a perpetually drunken, bitter man who mostly strolled around the kitchen dressed in only a pair of sagging tighty-whities, chain-smoking cigarettes. He abhorred paper and cloth towels in the kitchen so he kept a few folded sheets of greasy newspaper tucked into the apron he wore over his underwear. It's a blazing image sufficient to put you right off your cuppa noodles.

Not to be outdone in the repulsiveness department, Suzanne Goin, the phenom chef behind West Hollywood's Lucques restaurant, recounted her disillusioning externship in a two-star French restaurant. There, the head chef unabashedly served instant mashed potatoes and used wonton wrappers instead of fresh pasta for ravioli. He also had Goin mask rancid fish with garlicky tapenade.

Epiphanies are imparted, too, such as the moment Chris Bianco realized that eating isn't always about looking for another meal to top your last. And there is the cloud-bursting teenage Tom Colicchio did when he stumbled on the importance of salt and seasoning food.

There are endearing tales, as well, including the one of a 10-year-old Rick Bayless who asked his parents not for sports equipment like his brother had but for a copy of Julia Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking." And Mary Sue Milliken, of Too Hot Tamales acclaim, who retells with great animation the time in fourth grade she and her cousin had what can best be described as an adventure with yeast.

With few exceptions, all the chefs stayed on task with their essays. Some waxed short and some prattled along pleasurably. All were entertaining.

One suspects that the deft editing of Kimberly Witherspoon and Peter Meehan plays a large part in the collection's readability.

The only chef who really seemed to tango into wild territory was the last one in the book. Norman Van Aken, a highly regarded culinary educator, cookbook author and the only Floridian to have ever won entrance into the James Beard Foundation Who's Who, may simply have misunderstood his assignment.

Instead of sharing how he learned to cook, Van Aken provided a lengthy discourse of the many drugs he consumed and the experiences he had during his halcyon days in Hawaii in the 1970s. Ah, youth.

"How I Learned to Cook" can be appreciated by anyone who has ever cherished the notion of working in the culinary field. However, it can be an equally enjoyable read for anyone who has worked in any field anywhere. After all, who can't identify with the anxiety of a first job or trying to please an exacting boss tinged with more madness than management acumen?

Foodie/chef groupies, in particular, who are more star-struck by the likes of Jacques Pepin than George Clooney, could easily devour this book in a single marathon reading session. But, "How I Learned to Cook" is best savored in small bites - an essay here, a couple of essays there - to allow the page-by-page feast to linger a little longer.

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