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* COOKS | by Kathryn McAree
'n-BOOKS

Foodie Chick Lit

Food lover and writer Kathryn McAree has discovered a genre of fiction that makes that difficult choice between reading and cooking a little easier.

Sure, I'd like to tell you I read *War and Peace* into the wee hours of the morning, but the reality is that I devour a lot of what's commonly called "chick lit" in the publishing world—mostly on Sunday afternoons in my fleece pajamas under a cozy blanket on the couch. I don't just read any chick lit, though. It's got to have food-related content. Please inform the publishers of the world: I've discovered a new genre and it's called foodie chick lit.

Chick lit as the name implies is fiction written about, and almost exclusively by, women. These clever, funny stories focus on the emotion life and issues unique to modern, often single, women: intimate relationships, careers, friends, urban living. Think *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Candace Bushnell's *Sex in the City* franchise and Sophie Kinsella's Shopaholic books and you get the idea, although the genre encompasses a much wider range of the female experience.

It's the tone of the books that sets them apart: stylish, irreverently funny and compulsively readable. My favourite foodie chick lit author is Sarah-Kate Lynch from New Zealand. On a trip home from Auckland several years ago, I picked up a copy of *Eating with the Angels* (Black Swan, 2006) at the airport. It's a story about a New York restaurant critic who rises and falls through heartbreak and romance all the way to Venice. The craziness kept me occupied on the 14-hour flight to L.A., but tragedy struck on the connecting flight to Vancouver. I left the book on the plane. I remembered my loss at Canada Customs, but none of the Air Canada personnel seemed to care what happened to Connie, the troubled restaurant critic, as much as I did. I checked with Air Canada in Victoria, filed a report, but sadly they appeared unconcerned as well. It took a year before I could get my hands on another copy (at the time the book had been released only in New Zealand).

But now the world is ready for Lynch's latest novel, *The House of Peine*, released in New Zealand last year and in the U.K. as *The House of Joy* (Doubleday, 2007). Joyous it is as three estranged sisters inherit a champagne house in France (though I bet there is conflict and tragedy looming somewhere). A recent deal struck with Lynch's American publisher will bring the novel out under yet another name later this year, and it has already been optioned by a Hollywood film company. Can you imagine how fun it must have been to research writing about a champagne house?

Lynch's other foodie chick lit is just as compelling, but it's Lynch's humour that keeps me reading. *Blessed Are the Cheesemakers*, a saga based in Ireland, is somewhat, uh, cheesy, but also ridiculously funny. Another of her novels, *By Bread Alone*, brings a whole new meaning to the word deflowering... or should I say deflouring? The romance begins in France and follows the starter for decades. The starter, which gives natural life to bread, is precious to the story, the characters and to the reader. Lynch actually had eight starters in her kitchen as she was researching this novel, and to date has managed to keep one lone survivor alive and baking.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Lynch when I was in New Zealand, and when I asked her to divulge her favourite foodie novel, she didn't hesitate to lovingly tell me it was *Chocolat*. It is the story of a young mother who arrives at a somewhat remote French village with her six-year-old daughter and opens a small chocolaterie. The film version brought fame to British author Joanne Harris, who followed that 1999 bestseller with another novel, *Blackberry Wine* (Harper Perennial, 2000), set in the same location in France.

Although not strictly speaking chick lit because it is a memoir, Julie Powell's bestseller *Julie and Julia* (Back Bay Books, 2006) was marketed much like chick lit and the tone of the writing is similar. Powell was a frustrated secretarial temp living in New York and feeling her life was over at the age of 29 when she decided to try to save the situation by cooking every one of the 524 recipes in Julia Child's legendary *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. The blog she used to chronicle "my year of cooking dangerously" was a hit, the resulting book a bestseller. She refers to Child's book as "MIAoFC" and says reading it is like "reading pornographic bible verses," "childishly simple and dauntingly complex, incantatory and comforting." The story is a scream and will constantly leave you craving *Oeufs en Cocotte*, *Plombières* and *Poulet en Gelée à l'Estragon*. Can't you just imagine what those recipes stir up?

Back to fiction and now to Seattle author and classically trained chef Susan Volland, who had me in stitches with *Cooking for Mr. Right* (New American Library, 2005), the trials and tribulations of sous-chef Kate Linden and her ex-boyfriend Gaston. Complete with recipes, including the Pacific Northwest delicacy geoduck (pronounced gooey-duck, it is the largest bivalve along Puget Sound and the largest burrowing clam in the world), *Cooking for Mr. Right* will leave you turning pages and scrounging through cupboards to satisfy the cravings created while reading. Susan Volland also wrote another foodie chick lit novel called *Love and Meatballs*. Volland tells me it's out of print, but I managed to find a copy online through www.powells.com in Portland. I also ordered *The Men's Guide to the Women's Bathroom* (HarperCollins, 2007) by Jo Barrett. Believe it or not, the book has some serious foodie edge to it. The main character becomes involved with an organic farmer who, undoubtedly, will change her life. Powell's has the most delectable selection of cookbooks and foodie faves both out of print and new. Also try www.abebooks.com based in Victoria. In Vancouver, Barbara Jo's Books to Cooks has wonderful collections of food literature, food history, cookbooks and more.

If you love both food and fiction, you'll probably find the new genre of foodie chick lit deliciously satisfying.

Know of more great foodie books to keep me laughing and reading? Please drop me a line at feedback@eatmagazine.ca