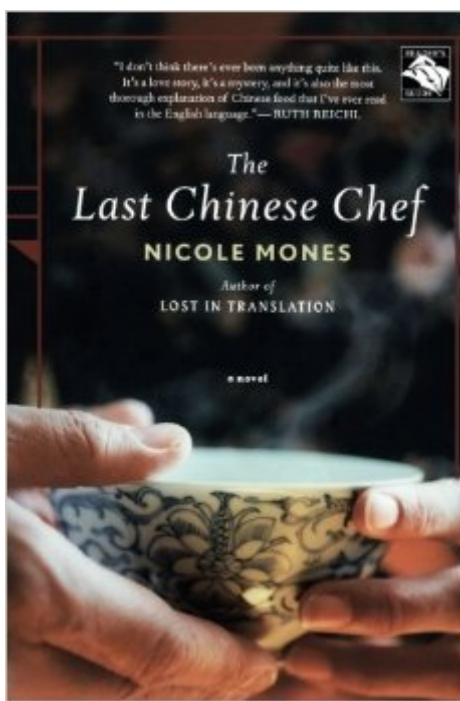


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The Last Chinese Chef: A Novel



Synopsis

This alluring novel of friendship, love, and cuisine brings the best-selling author of *Lost in Translation* and *A Cup of Light* to one of the great Chinese subjects: food. As in her previous novels, Mones's captivating story also brings into focus a changing China -- this time the hidden world of high culinary culture. When Maggie McElroy, a widowed American food writer, learns of a Chinese paternity claim against her late husband's estate, she has to go immediately to Beijing. She asks her magazine for time off, but her editor counters with an assignment: to profile the rising culinary star Sam Liang. In China Maggie unties the knots of her husband's past, finding out more than she expected about him and about herself. With Sam as her guide, she is also drawn deep into a world of food rooted in centuries of history and philosophy. To her surprise she begins to be transformed by the cuisine, by Sam's family -- a querulous but loving pack of cooks and diners -- and most of all by Sam himself. *The Last Chinese Chef* is the exhilarating story of a woman regaining her soul in the most unexpected of places.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

There are certain times where I feel a certain condescension when I read foreigners trying to read meanings and poetry into what I feel is my domain as a person of Chinese ancestry. This isn't one of those times. In fact I feel humbled and delighted by the lessons that Nicole Mones was able to impart upon me. It is rare that I get up from a book about China so totally enthralled and educated from a tome written by a yang ren, a foreigner. This book is the second book that has made me feel

this way in the last few years. The first was *Oracle Bones: A Journey Between China's Past and Present* by Peter Hessler, it was a non-fictional observation about China and the impact that globalization has had on Chinese society. This book is a work of fiction, by virtue of that fact, it was able to draw me further into all that it had to convey: on being Chinese, on the complicated intertwining of Chinese food culture and general culture, on the meaning of *guanxi*, on the wonders of Chinese cuisine. I had always felt that due to the unsavory nature of Chinese-American food as it is, that the true nature of Chinese cuisine has never been fully unleashed on the American palate. I have stewed on the fact that the French and Italian cuisines rank so much higher on the sophistication scale of the American gastronome versus the lowly Chinese cuisine. I felt it but I was unable to express it adequately. Nicole Mones has done this and more with this story.

I am stupefied, astonished and bumfuzzled by this book. What does it want to be? It's a history of China's food, Communist Revolution and massage parlors. It's a memoir of an old woman's childhood, a young woman's degrading relationships with men, an old man's career in restaurants and an ex-pat preparing for his mother's death --- and NONE of these people are central to the story. Their first person narratives are somewhat compelling but brief and in the end pointless. Instead, the main story centers on Sam and Maggie, two of the most wooden, tepidly written characters you'll ever come across. Sam is a Chinese/American chef and Maggie is an American food writer sent to China to interview him. The problem is they're flat as cardboard. Open to any page and try to imagine real people speaking the dialog of these two. For instance, after Sam has failed to impress his uncle with his cooking, he prepares to try again. In the kitchen, Sam says to Maggie: "He's right. A meal like this has to be subtle." He cut with irritated clacks of his cleaver. "I ought to have known that." "Well," she said. She sat listening to the rhythm of his cutting. This was a sound she liked. In time she noticed that the kitchen was a litter of sauces, chopped piles, covered dishes, and used bowls, and she walked to where he was standing. "I think you should move over, Sam. If you could. Make room at the sink. I can't cook in the slightest. I would never think of trying to help you. But I can wash. I happen to be very good at washing, and there's a lot of it here. Let me clean up behind you." "You can't do that. You should sit down. You're a guest." "You want me to be relaxed, right? Comfortable?" She waited for his confirming glance. "Then let me help. You're American.

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