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Serve The People: A Stir-Fried Journey Through China



Synopsis

As a freelance journalist and food writer living in Beijing, Jen Lin-Liu already had a ringside seat for China's exploding food scene. When she decided to enroll in a local cooking school—held in an unheated classroom with nary a measuring cup in sight—she jumped into the ring herself. In *Serve the People*, Lin-Liu gives a memorable and mouthwatering cook's tour of today's China as she progresses from cooking student to noodle-stall and dumpling-house apprentice to intern at a chic Shanghai restaurant. The characters she meets along the way include poor young men and women streaming in from the provinces in search of a *decent bowl* (living wage), a burgeoning urban middle class hungry for luxury after decades of turmoil and privation, and the mentors who take her in hand in the kitchen and beyond. Together they present an unforgettable slice of contemporary China in the full swing of social and economic transformation. The accompanying reference guide is included as a PDF on this disc.

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Customer Reviews

The author is a Chinese American journalist living in Beijing. It should be noted that she is a fluent speaker of Chinese and it would not have been possible to do the research that she did without good Chinese language skills. I mention this because I think it adds credibility to her research and what she has to say. To be able to interview and interact with people without an interpreter I think is very valuable and will allow one to get stories that would otherwise be unlikely, if not impossible. The title of the book comes from the socialist slogan coined by Mao Zedong and popularized by the communist party: *wèi rén rǎn* (we're not for people), which literally means "for people

serve." When I first arrived in China in the early eighties you could find lapel pins all over the place with this slogan. Though it is used less these days, you still hear it once in awhile, probably more in official settings. This book is divided into four parts, 1) Cooking School, 2) Noodle Intern, 3) Fine Dining, and 4) Hutong Cooking. In the first part Lin-Liu describes her experience as a student in the Hualian Cooking School in Beijing, a three month course, Monday through Friday for two hours a day. In the second part of the book, Lin-Liu apprentices with a noodle chef from Shanxi Province. In Part Three she moves to Shanghai and works in a high end Shanghai restaurant on the Bund called The Whampoa Club. The book ends with a rather short section on Hutong cooking. A *hǎtǎng* is an alley or lane and is used to identify many of the old Beijing neighborhoods characterized by courtyard houses and mazes of narrow lanes. I really enjoyed this book. Lin-Liu did an excellent job drawing the reader into the world of Chinese food and eating.

My mother returned from China with tales of duck tongue and fried chicken feet being offered up as authentic dishes for diners. Personally, I found this both fascinating and a little disgusting - it was this mix of wonder and dread that led me to pick up this book penned by Jen Lin-Liu, a Chinese-American journalist trying to find her culinary way in the cities and towns of China. Beginning in a Beijing cooking school where she struggles to be taken seriously, to a tiny noodle shop, to the kitchen of a famous fine dining establishment in Shanghai, Jen Lin-Liu provides a well-written account of her search to understand multifaceted, often obfuscated China. Our stomachs become the vehicle to uncover how China has changed politically, socially, economically, and gastronomically since its "liberation." The people introduced in this book have remarkable stories and the short *esposés* scattered throughout the text (on MSG among other things) demonstrate Lin-Liu's strength as a journalist. Her aptitude as a chef is evident through the inclusion of numerous recipes discussed in the body of her writing. There are a number of things to admire in this text as well and as a few things that might turn the average American reader's stomach; Lin-Liu is induced to try a number of unappetizing things including dog meat and animal genitalia. If you can get beyond the "ick" factor of these brief encounters, this book has a great deal to offer in terms of its unique insight. The only time it fell short for me was near the very end when Lin-Liu falls in love and her writing moves from descriptive to mushy (a different type of "ick" factor). In my mind it took away from an otherwise polished story of self discovery set against the backdrop of cultural exploration.

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