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Kitchens Of The Great Midwest: A Novel



Synopsis

“A sweet and savory treat. People” “An impressive feat of narrative jujitsu . . . that keeps readers turning the pages too fast to realize just how ingenious they are.” The New York Times Book Review, Editor’s Pick
Kitchens of the Great Midwest is a novel about a young woman with a once-in-a-generation palate who becomes the iconic chef behind the country’s most coveted dinner reservation. It was selected as a best book of the year by , BookPage, LibraryReads, and NPR. When Lars Thorvald’s wife, Cynthia, falls in love with wine and a dashing sommelier, he’s left to raise their baby, Eva, on his own. He’s determined to pass on his love of food to his daughter—starting with purloined pork shoulder. As Eva grows, she finds her solace and salvation in the flavors of her native Minnesota. From Scandinavian lutefisk to hydroponic chocolate habaneros, each ingredient represents one part of Eva’s journey as she becomes the star chef behind a legendary and secretive pop-up supper club, culminating in an opulent and emotional feast that’s a testament to her spirit and resilience. Each chapter in J. Ryan Stradal’s startlingly original debut tells the story of a single dish and character, at once capturing the zeitgeist of the Midwest, the rise of foodie culture, and delving into the ways food creates community and a sense of identity. By turns quirky, hilarious, and vividly sensory, Kitchens of the Great Midwest is an unexpected mother-daughter story about the bittersweet nature of life—its missed opportunities and its joyful surprises. It marks the entry of a brilliant new talent.

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Customer Reviews

An Best Book of August 2015: Get ready for the jokes. I'd wager you'll be hearing that J. Ryan Stradal's Kitchens of the Great Midwest is "delicious" and that he has "cooked up" a great story about food and foodies, a story that will leave you "satisfied, not hungry for more." I would try not to make such lame jokes here, but what can I say? This debut novel is as tempting as a piece of Key Lime pie, so perfect is its ratio of tart-to-sweet. The ingredients: a misfit Midwestern girl whose special gift happens to be a golden palate; single-parented by a large and lovable father/chef, she can taste a spice in a trice, and manage the hottest sauces west of the Mississippi. Never mind that Eva is shy and sort of weird looking, she knows she's got the secret sauce and she grows more confident by the day, thanks to such concoctions as the simplest pan sautéed Walleye and original, perfect Caesar salad (which, if you don't know and I didn't, it was not an invention of Julius Caesar but rather that of one Italian-born chef named Caesar Cardini). No one, least of all, Eva, is surprised when she becomes a superstar chef in our food-obsessed culture. Eva knows that people do not live by even home baked bread alone and her quest in this novel is for sustenance of the emotional kind. Whether and where and how she finds it is the book's special treat. And yes, you will devour it. Sara Nelson --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Stradal's novel chronicles the young life of Eva Thorvald, beginning with her birth to a woman who would rather become an expert sommelier than a mom and who leaves with no forwarding address. Her father dies shortly after of a heart attack. The narrative then moves on to three key moments in Eva's life: in her preteens, her teens, and her 20s. Each section ends in a suspenseful way and many of the characters reappear in later sections. Eva's teen years are crucial to the other parts of the narrative. Her arrival in a new high school brings romance with a boy who is awkward but smitten. Meanwhile, she works in a restaurant to help her ailing uncle and guardian pay the bills. In the restaurant, she learns about food and acquires a reputation for her marvelous palate, preparing the way for Eva's 20s, when her dinners, given as private reserved affairs, bring her fame and satisfaction. There is much to love here for readers of all ages. Stradal's gentle humor pokes fun at such Midwest customs as calling any cold food a salad and satirizes a few young foodies, too. The plot moves quickly, and the unusual and stimulating structure allows readers to think about what may have happened during the gaps. And teens will enjoy seeing a girl who cannot finish high school nevertheless become a success. VERDICT A very special novel most readers will hate to

see end. — Karlan Sick, Library Consultant, New York City --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

KITCHENS OF THE GREAT MIDWEST by J. Ryan Stradal revolves around Eva Louise Thorvald, the only child from the brief marriage of a chef and a sommelier. The reader meets Eva as an infant, follows up with her as a preteen, catches a glimpse of her during her teen years, and then finishes the reader's relationship with her as Eva settles into her 20s. Stradal tells Eva's story in a manner reminiscent of a short story collection, and with each chapter she is viewed largely through the eyes of people whose lives she touches as she navigates the world. As one would expect from a character with a "once-in-a-generation palate," Eva's interactions with others are largely food-focused, and the author happily includes a few recipes for those inclined to try out the food that sounds so delicious on the page. KITCHENS is a beautifully written bit of fiction that manages to make the reader pause and think about the meaning of family, the importance of community and friends, and the role food plays in our lives. It somehow does all of that without being overbearing and stuffy. For a time I wanted the entire book to be completely from Eva's perspective, but I think something would have been lost if the author had gone that route. Twenty-something-Eva is a mysterious and elusive character, and the author's method added to that. As I finished KITCHENS, I was left wanting more of Eva and her food--much like the characters in the book.

This linked collection of stories was an absolute joy to read. J Ryan Stradal hasn't just created a little universe for this book, he's created a family of characters, which at times can be a much more difficult task. What's the difference? While making a universe within a book, it's important to have events, locations, and changes of power linked within the in order to create the 'illusion' to the reader. But what the author did here was create a universe of people, a 'family' of people related by blood and not, with an extremely deft hand. What's important is that this is not a book bogged down by exposition, but something you tear through, learning a little more through subtle allusions and callbacks. It makes sense that his background is in screenwriting, because he's incorporated the excellent mechanic of informing the reader of the exposition without SAYING it. Instead, a reader will have full knowledge of an intricate web of connections without feeling like they had to read through a Tolkien-esque lineage of characters. It may seem like an obvious thing to incorporate, but it's an important aspect I've seen ignored again and again in novels. Such a thing is essential when creating a screenplay, in which you only have 30-45 minutes to tell what you need to. The mechanics are at the heart of the stories, but the soul is what really brings this book together.

Stradal perfectly captures the complicated personalities of midwestern folk: the blue-collar restaurant workers, the personally oblivious obsessives, the no-nonsense Lutheran housewives. But he doesn't necessarily satirize them or try to paint characterizes. He presents them with a relatable simplicity, highlighting that these people don't just fit in the box we would like them to, and he doesn't blame them for that. He presents them, warts and all, walking us through their logic and hypocrisies, their mistakes and triumphs, their pride and their sadness. The result is a book full of characters that may be very different from your own life experience, but feel intimately connected with as people. Like any good writer, he has found a shortcut to the reader's empathy and simply illuminated the path. In addition to these things, the story is heartwarming, but not unrealistic. There is a lot of the good old-fashioned midwestern humbleness we'd come to expect from the stereotypes we've been lead to believe. But there is a lot of blood, strife, and sadness along the way, which is just as important to highlight. The thing that he nailed in this book was that that midwestern, god-fearing kindness like to project isn't a result of an easy, saccharine life. It's a by-product of a life filled with loss and bitter weather, where people learn to appreciate life, offering what they can because they know exactly how bad it can get.

This was a very interesting and "quirky" read. It took me a little while to catch on the way the main character becomes a part of each chapter. I liked the characters and found myself laughing out loud at some of the episodes. I would recommend this book to any of my friends, especially those who enjoy cooking.

Wow! This wasn't what I was expecting at all. I had heard some buzz around this debut novel and was excited to sink my teeth into it on a recent vacation. While it didn't take me to the places I thought it would it was a ride I won't soon forget. Eva was born into a seemingly normal Mid-West family until a series of events impacted her for the rest of her life. This story is incredibly character driven and we are quickly introduced to a wide net of folks that influence and create the person that she developed into. Teenage angst, college confusion, and adult BS are all equally represented in truly unique forms. No detail is overlooked when it comes to the characters. You will be left wanting to know even more about each person you are introduced to and eager with anticipation in finding out how and where they fit in. I'm not going to go into great detail regarding the story itself, it's for you to discover and take as you might. What I will tell you is that this is an adventure and a ride to be discovered on the backs of people who are relatable, exposed, and vulnerable. This is a story of character and triumph that at times will leave you upset and others thrilled. This novel is a triumph

and truly a story that will engulf you from start to finish. Full of life, language, and growth. Foodies will rejoice and rethink everything they know.

As the South Dakota One Book pick I was disappointed, I expected more. I wasn't pleased with the language and wonder if it wasn't picked because Pierre, Wall Drug, and South Dakota was mentioned.

Shoof. I made it through, mostly because it became a quest to highlight passages that drove me nuts. So many needless references to exact songs on the radio, brands of cars being driven, ... knowing they are Crate and Barrel chairs on the deck doesn't help the story and is super distracting. And those types of details were endless. Not to mention the story moved at a random pace, again with such needless details taking away from the story. Can't recommend. Some people loved it? Very surprising. I would have quit half way through if it weren't our book club book.

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