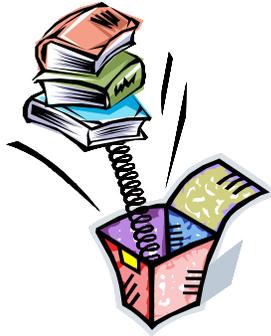


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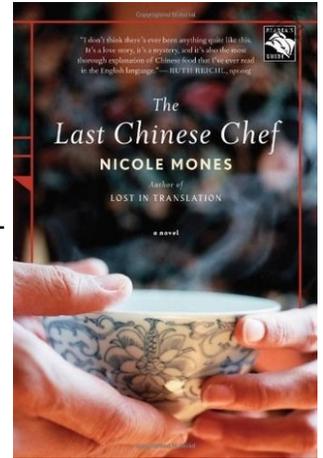
Book Club in a Box

THE LAST CHINESE CHEF

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About the Book

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.



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About the Author



A newly launched textile business took Nicole Mones to China for the first time in 1977, after the end of the Cultural Revolution. As an individual she traded textiles with China for eighteen years before she turned to writing about that country. Her novels *Night in Shanghai*, *The Last Chinese Chef*, *Lost in Translation* and *A Cup of Light* are in print in more than twenty-two languages and have received multiple juried prizes, including the Kafka Prize (year's best work of fiction by any American woman) and Kiriyaama Prize (finalist; for the work of fiction which best enhances understanding of any Pacific Rim Culture).

Mones' nonfiction writing on China has also appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Gourmet*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*. She is a member of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations.

Q & A with the Author

Serious Chinese cuisine is an unusual backdrop for a novel. Why choose this?

Because there is a magnificent world of Chinese food which remains invisible to most Americans. Most of what we call Chinese food in this country is a hybrid cuisine, different and far more limited, so very few people here have ever even experienced this food, much less glimpsed the depth and elegance of its conceptual framework. Cuisine in China does so much more than sustain the body. It heals; it nourishes the heart, stimulates the mind, and even calls back the soul. So while the novel does lift the curtain on a previously hidden world, its story is universal. We all have times when we need a little help in calling back the soul.

You started working in China in 1977. How did you get involved there so early, before diplomatic relations were resumed?

America had lifted its ban on its citizens doing business in China in the early 70s, but no more than a handful of people had tried to do anything. Maybe that's why I was able to do it. When Zhou Enlai and later Mao Zedong died in 1976, I could see that China was going to emerge. I did some research and fixed on buying woolen textiles to sell in the United States. My friend Cyndi Crabtree, an accountant and gifted financial analyst, did the business planning. And I started sending letters to the Chinese government asking them to invite me to come there and do business.

Did they answer?

Not for a long time. Then one day a card appeared in my mailbox - an embossed invitation, such as one might receive to a party. *The honor of your company is requested in China. Bring this card to the following address in Washington, D.C., with your passport and you will receive a visa.* I rushed to Washington and knocked on the door of the nondescript apartment which housed China's discreet liaison office, clutching the invitation card and my passport. I'll never forget the shock on the face of the Mao-suited man who opened the door to find me, a girl by herself who appeared much too young. His stare said, *You're the person who's been writing us these letters?* But he gave me a visa. And on the

strength of that, a bank gave a loan. Obviously it couldn't happen like this today. But I did this at a time when both governments had decided they were ready for trade but no more than a handful of companies, as yet, had tried it. So it worked.

What was it like when you first got there? The Cultural Revolution had been formally ended by the National People's Congress just six weeks before. You had to go to a rural border village north of Hong Kong and cross on foot. British authorities would exit-stamp you to walk across a wooden bridge with your suitcase. You could see Chinese in green military uniforms waiting to admit you into their world. I remember being surprised I made it across without fainting. It was very surreal. At that time China was pre-modern; to enter it was to fall back in time to the 1940s. And people were completely traumatized by the Cultural Revolution and the famine that had preceded it.

Was it hard doing business there as a young woman? Not really. I was so strange there anyway, especially then, that I might as well have been from another planet. My gender and youth were mere footnotes. My colleagues were much more surprised by the fact that I came to China alone. The first two times Cyndi went with me, but after that and for the eighteen years I ran that business, I went by myself. I feel very lucky to have been a fly on the wall in China continuously, from the Cultural Revolution to the transformed society we see today.

When you arrived did you speak Chinese?

Not a word. I had zero knowledge of China or its language. On the other hand I was thrilled to realize that since I was a business traveler no one kept much of an eye on me. I could go where I liked, alone, without any government minders. Only one problem: I didn't speak Chinese, so I couldn't go anywhere. I really had to go back to night school and learn. Then it happened that as I was gaining the ability to converse, the curtain of silence was also lifting on recent traumas such as the Cultural Revolution. I found Chinese everywhere filled with the need to tell their stories. They wanted to reveal what they had been through. In those years I absorbed countless tales of people's lives. This prepared me to write novels with Chinese

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characters.

When did you become interested in food?

From the moment I arrived there. You can imagine what a shock it was to sit down to my first banquet in The People's Republic. I had never dreamed such dishes existed. In the eighteen years I did business in China, banquets were a regular feature of my visits to the provincial offices of the state-owned textile corporation. At first I could not understand why each banquet would include me, the lone guest, and hordes of people from the local office - most of whom I'd never seen before. Years later I was chagrined to comprehend what these banquets actually meant to them. Food then was rationed. The chance to eat real cuisine - banquet-level dishes which were works of art, cooked by top professional chefs - was extraordinary. Of course everyone crowded in.

As I learned Chinese, I also came to see that the cuisine had a secret language of its own. From seating to serving to the menu itself, every arranged meal sent signals without words. Often in those years I would hear foreign businessmen complain that they had sat through a three-hour banquet only to find their every attempt to discuss business rebuffed. They did not understand that the banquet itself was the conversation.

Was there much of a restaurant scene then?

No. In the early fifties, the government left open only a few restaurants and shuttered the rest. By the nineties, that had changed. Privatization arrived and the restaurant industry was one of the first to bloom. You might say food, formerly reviled as decadent, was one of the first of life's pleasures to be rehabilitated in the new free-market China. Now it's really big. There's keen competition to create great cuisine. It's a boom time for the art form.

After finishing this book, some readers are going to wish they could taste the dishes described in it.

They can. Many of the dishes featured in the book are currently in the repertoire of a great Chinese chef somewhere in the world, and can be sampled should lucky travelers find themselves nearby. Some of these chefs even gave their recipes, so home cooks can try them too. Information on tasting and cooking dishes from the novel can be found in *For Food Lovers*.

What was it like researching this book? Fascinating from the start, and it only got better. In the eight years since I started writing about Chinese food for *Gourmet*, a food scene has continued to re-emerge with great force. I've interviewed a lot of people-chefs, gourmets, owners, managers. I've seen that Chinese cuisine has its own philosophy, its sensibility, its inner erudition. It's so much more than merely food.

How did you approach a cuisine so different from the food of the West?

For me, that was exactly what was most interesting to ask: how was Chinese food different? What qualities distinguished it from the world's other cuisines? As I traveled, conducted interviews, read, and of course ate, I found several answers. First, to a much greater degree than other cuisines, Chinese food consciously seeks to reflect and comment on its culture through a web of references and allusions. It encompasses a world-and maybe that's one reason it's seen as a serious art form in China. Second: Chinese food specifically tries to engage the mind, not just the palate. There is a whole tradition of artifice dishes, dishes that come to the table looking like one thing but turn out to be something else. Other dishes call up events in history or great works of art. Still others aim to spur the creation of poetry at table. Third, the highest lesson of Chinese food, its single most important characteristic: the focus on community. All food in China is shared. Nothing is ever plated for the individual-the opposite of cuisine in the West. Through the ritual of eating together, every day, the human bonds that hold the world together are forged and reinforced. That's the journey at the heart of *The Last Chinese Chef*.

Further Reading

If you liked *Last Chinese Chef*, you might like:

Five Quarters of the Orange by Joanne Harris

Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel

My Life in France by Julia Child

The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake by Aimee Bender

The Valley of Amazement by Amy Tan

Discussion Questions

1. What was unique about the setting of the book and how did it enhance or take away from the story?
2. How do characters change or evolve throughout the course of the story? What events trigger such changes?
3. In what ways do the events in the books reveal evidence of the author's world view?
4. What are the most important relationships?
5. What is this book's message?
6. Were you surprised by the culinary history and culture of Chinese cuisine?
7. Do you find spiritual exploration by cooking or eating? After reading this book do you feel at all differently about how you cook and eat with others in your own life?
8. How has Maggie's experience in Beijing altered her by the book's end? What kind of future do you imagine for her, for Sam?
9. Reviewers have described this book as "tantalizing," "mouthwatering," "delicious." What about Mones's descriptions make them so tempting? Was there a particular food scene that you found especially memorable or mouthwatering?
10. Do you know of other cultures that honor connections and relationships in the same way through food?