

FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

Japanese authors weaving tales of eating and life's mysteries

BY JANET REYNOLDS

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Even people who don't consider themselves foodies know deep down that food is memory. Special recipes handed down from generation to generation, celebratory meals, even meals gone horribly wrong — they are all part of our psyche in ways that often go unnoticed. These books are a reminder that many of our stories begin, and perhaps end, with food.



Butter

Asako Yuzuki, translated from Japanese by Polly Barton, Ecco, 452 pages, \$19.99

Where the other recommendations in this column are quiet, feel-good reads, *Butter* is a psychological food thriller. The coverlines call it a “novel of food and murder,” but really

this international bestseller is about women, food, body standards and social norms.

The novel is inspired by the real-life case of Kanae Kijima, who was convicted in 2009 of poisoning three men. In *Butter*, journalist Rika Machida becomes fascinated by the story of Manako Kajii, a serial killer and gourmet food blogger, seeing landing an interview with her as a potential way to become the first woman to make it to the editorial desk at her magazine. The story unfolds as Rika begins meeting with Manako in the Tokyo Detention Center, following up on the hints Manako doles out about her life in

teaspoonfuls — indeed, most of them are food-related — as she tries to uncover the “real” story.

But this novel is also one of transformation for Rika, who mostly has traded food and even thinking about her body for hard work and a fairly ascetic life. As she begins to cook and eat — the first meal Manako gives her to try as a test is simply rice, a drop of soy sauce and butter — the act becomes one of the most sensuous experiences of her life. It's as if Rika has never eaten before. As her awakening begins — to herself, her body, her relationships — Rika undergoes a transformation that includes gaining weight in a culture where females are held to impossible standards. Nor is she alone. Her boyfriend, her best friend and a long-trusted source are all inevitably changed. And the chef stirring the pot throughout? Manako.

Butter is a delicious if unsettling novel that will leave you thinking long after the last page — probably as you eat something dripping in butter.



Menu of Happiness

Hisashi Kashiwai, translated from Japanese by Jesse Kirkwood, G.P. Putnam, 213 pages, \$27

The third book in the Kamogawa Food Detectives series, *Menu of Happiness* once again follows the father-daughter duo who do more

than serve up delectable meals at the Kamogawa Diner. They know inherently that food is memory, that specific meals last far longer than the last bite, and that in some instances eating that meal once more can help heal a spiritual wound from long ago and therefore, potentially, change the future. Chef Nagari is the father and food detective who seeks and then recreates each meal, while his daughter, Koishi, interviews the people about the meal they are seeking, asking the necessary questions to try to better understand why they came to the diner.

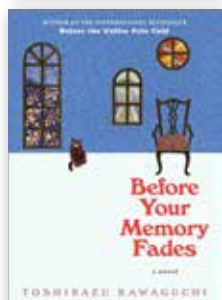
Each chapter is devoted to one person's tale. We meet a once-renowned pianist who ended her promising career with a self-inflicted wound. She wants to eat once again the yakisoba her first and only love made her before the relationship disastrously ended. In another chapter, a man regrets his behavior toward a former lover. The gyoza he seeks could be the start of change.

A short but delightful read, the book will leave you thinking about the important recipes and meals in your life, some of them happy and some perhaps seasoned with a bit of regret — and the reminder that there is still, possibly, time to change those memories.



Before the Coffee Gets Cold and Before Your Memory Fades

(Picador, 2019, 272 pages, \$19.99;
Picador, 2022, 320 pages, \$21.99) by
Toshikazu Kawaguchi, translated from
Japanese by Geoffrey Trousselot



The second and third books of what is now a six-book series, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* and *Before Your Memory Fades* both ask the same question: What would you change if you could travel in time? Who would you want to meet and why?

Each of these books features an unusual café where customers can travel in time. Customers must sit in a particular seat, they cannot leave the seat or the café after they travel back in time, and they must drink the coffee before it gets cold in order to return to the present. Also, nothing they do or say in the past will change the present.

Each book follows different customers trying to come to a better understanding or acceptance of something that has happened. The stories are poignant and filled with twists. Every single customer comes back changed in all the best ways — just like the reader.

If you love historical fiction, are a fantasy fan or are just interested in thinking more about why and how you're doing what you're doing, this is a series worth checking out. ■



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