

A Child's Christmas in San Francisco

John Briscoe

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A Child's Christmas in San Francisco is a short and sweet regional poetry collection that includes light doses of history and entertainment.

John Briscoe's *A Child's Christmas in San Francisco* is an ode to the city's culinary and poetic heritage.

This seven-day yuletide run-up to Christmas celebrates each day with a poem dedicated to a particular restaurant or food that made its mark on the City by the Bay. Tamales, sourdough bread, cioppino, and martinis are among the featured staples of the city's food scene; and the poems about them are the products of San Francisco school children, from the days when Briscoe and his classmates challenged each other to come up with the best compositions based on a particular subject, like the tamale at Red's.

This nostalgic food tour ranges from the present day back to the Gold Rush days, too, rendering it an important historical compilation of handed-down poetry that is affectionate in recollecting places and people that are no more. While its brief poems are its centerpiece, they are garnished with generous amounts of vintage photography and witty commentary. Briscoe contributes historical background on some of the city's famous but now forgotten imports, including pisco punch, San Francisco's favorite drink prior to Prohibition. He also features goodies that are still treasured today, like the It's-It ice cream sandwich. Other paeans ponder the secret recipe behind sourdough, the halcyon days when Ocean Beach was occupied by a full-tilt amusement park, and the true origins of the martini.

Each poem is charming in its own right. Some emulate the free-flowing levity of radio jingles; others include dark notes, as with a Christmas Eve lament for cioppino and sourdough in which a condemned murderer requests the dishes as a last meal. Sing-song rhythms factor in, as do brainy twists of language. In "Martini Monday," the beverage blossoms into a romantic reverie that locates the poet on a slow boat to Mandalay; elsewhere, "Red's Tamale Day" thinks of those for whom Red's tamale doesn't quite hit the spot—including Briscoe himself, who is bemused by the dish's popularity—and so features an amusing plethora of other options, including the tamale by Sinaloa on Powell Street; it encourages a trip down to the Mission for Roosevelt's chicken tamales.

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