

Last Bite

Nancy Verde Barr

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When Casey Costello's boyfriend announces that he wants a break from the relationship, her mother starts making cannoli. "Making cannoli was her way of acknowledging there was a 'situation,'" Casey tells the reader. From the first few pages of this novel, human relationships and food are intertwined. How a character interacts with food becomes a telling sign of the type of person she is. Those who do not respect and admire food and its preparation inevitably have some larger character flaws as well.

The author's interest in food and cooking go far beyond their literary uses, however. She worked as an executive chef to Julia Child for almost a decade, was also a culinary producer for ABC's *Good Morning America*, and wrote two award-winning cookbooks.

In this, her first work of fiction, Barr focuses on material she knows well. The novel's first-person narrator is the executive chef for a network morning news show, where she works closely with the Julia Child-like Sally Woods. As the novel begins, Casey is going through a bad breakup with her boyfriend. A new romantic interest soon appears in the form of Danny O'Shae, a rising star in the culinary world.

The romance between Casey and Danny follows a rather traditional romantic comedy trajectory: when she first meets him Casey strongly dislikes the flirtatious Danny; nevertheless, she finds herself putting on a little black dress "that would stop my Nonna's heart if she saw me in it" when she knows she will see him at a party. Their courtship progresses with fits and starts and culminates with a romantic day in Florence that is modeled on *Roman Holiday*, only with lots and lots of deliciously described food.

Barr is best, not surprisingly, when she is writing about food and its preparation. Readers who are also foodies will find the description of Danny and Casey's lunch in Florence just as erotic as the love scene that occurs later that night, if not more so. And the details about what is involved in producing a three-minute cooking segment on television are fascinating.

Where the novel falters is with the convoluted and underdeveloped subplot involving the Julia Child-like character, her mysterious new agent, a deceased husband, the Russian mafia, and American intelligence agencies—whose agents seem more than willing to share classified information in casual conversation.

Despite the bland side dish of political thriller, *Last Bite* serves up a delicious dish of culinary romance. Enjoy it with a nice glass of Pinot Noir.

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