

The Two-Plate Solution: A Novel of Culinary Mayhem in the Middle East

Jeff Oliver

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The Two-Plate Solution is a molten broth of comic, nonstop action from page one. The American TV show *Natural Dish-aster* is shooting in Israel, and producer Sara Sinek, a Special Forces veteran with a secret about her time embedded with the Israeli Defense Force, is wrangling her vapid chef-testants into gear so they can wrap up the “abomination” that is season five. When a Palestinian bereavement support group falsely pursued by the police crashes past the “KravMaGuards” on set, Sara orchestrates a scheme to disguise them as actors playing terrorists competing against a united chef team on the show.

The complicated plot twists and dips from there like an ancient Cuisinart with a worn cord, but it is clearly backseat to the satire. A television executive himself, Oliver has a flippant familiarity with behind-the-scenes action, and he spares no one in the large cast of over-the-top characters, from the shallow judges to the puffed-up network execs. His focus is to skewer reality television, and competitive cooking shows in particular.

The descriptions of the TV chefs, whose ridiculous résumés, gimmicky personas, and vanity are only excused by their supermodel hotness, are one hoot after another: Texas “cowboy” Dex wears ten-gallon hats and barbecues everything, while molecular gastronome Brandon converts everything into foam.

The flippant familiarity with behind-the-scenes drama keeps this “novel of culinary mayhem” moving. There are ludicrous cooking challenges galore; one involves digging on the beach to retrieve coolers of bizarre ingredients; another involves finely chopping ingredients for a Bible-themed amuse-bouche atop a fifty-foot crane while standing over a trapdoor. Snarky snippets of contestant’s “interviews,” complete with edited-out bits, add a lot of flavor.

Underneath the chuckles and the hyperbole, this romp is a fable with some hopeful themes about the shared humanity of Jews and Arabs (and common love of hummus and halvah) and about cooking simply and with joy. *The Two-Plate Solution* ends up being a very satisfying book, wrapped up in a guilty pleasure.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (May/June 2018)

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