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Heat: An Amateur Cook In A Professional Kitchen



Synopsis

A highly acclaimed writer and editor, Bill Buford left his job at The New Yorker for a most unlikely destination: the kitchen at Babbo, the revolutionary Italian restaurant created and ruled by superstar chef Mario Batali. Finally realizing a long-held desire to learn first-hand the experience of restaurant cooking, Buford soon finds himself drowning in improperly cubed carrots and scalding pasta water on his quest to learn the tricks of the trade. His love of Italian food then propels him on journeys further afield: to Italy, to discover the secrets of pasta-making and, finally, how to properly slaughter a pig. Throughout, Buford stunningly details the complex aspects of Italian cooking and its long history, creating an engrossing and visceral narrative stuffed with insight and humor.

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Customer Reviews

The author, Bill Buford, is my kinda guy. He was a sometime cook around the house, got into the writing game at the New Yorker, and then went whole hog into learning about the restaurant business from behind the kitchen's swinging doors. Buford didn't take the soft road to his education.

He went to work for some of the power-houses of the culinary industry. "We buy some type of raw food, do something to it, and then sell it for a profit" is the *raison d'être* of the professional chef. Buford had two goals; to see what the food prep work is all about and improve his skills preparing good food. So, in concert with Mario Batali and others of that ilk, he put on the whites, the crocs and the bandanna and dove in. Restaurants are places that many people think consists of a folded napkin with silverware and a glass of water on a white tablecloth. Buford's schooling starts with the beating out of his psyche any semblance of manhood - and bringing out the little boy looking for an after school job washing dishes. I have had some experiences dealing with some of the *prima donnas* of the restaurant industry. After finishing *Heat* I gained a new respect for those that toil behind the swinging doors of the dining room. Buford discloses that fads, fetishes and failures are common in the restaurant industry. His training is harsh because there is no sentimentality in the food service business; when one part of the team falls short, the rest can tumble into chaos at the busiest part of the night. In the end, Buford is a somewhat polished gem. I loved the detail he included in *Heat* about the move he made to grillman and the proximity in which he worked to a hot oven. This is probably the best book ever written about the horizon of knowledge it takes to be a top chef in the finest restaurants around the world. Here's how much I liked *Heat*. When I am out on a book scouting mission, if I find a used copy for a reasonable price, I buy it for friends that love to cook - and have restaurant cooking as an avocation.

I'll offer right up front that Bill Buford offers in this book what I have been missing from Anthony Bourdain's books--both offer a wonderful no-holds-barred approach to the restaurant culture and the madness that lies behind the swinging kitchen door as well as a sheer love for food, but while Bourdain has much more of the insider appeal and the edge of experience from which to tell his tales, Buford is, hands-down, a darn better writer. This book is an intense view of the world of Italian food. It is researched and experienced. Buford made a reputation with *Among the Thugs* of going deep into his subject matter, culminating (in *Thugs*) in being beaten by cops as though he were one (after he had worked hard to be one of them). Rather than take a removed, journalistic perspective, researching from afar, Buford dives right in and learns everything from the inside. In this book, Buford comes under the wing of rockstar-chef Mario Batali, and though he may fancy himself a foodie who could have become a renowned chef himself had he put in the time, the work of the kitchen turns out to be a whole different world. From almost day one, Buford learns that there is a proper way to dice carrots (which he didn't do), uncovering the first of many lessons I would learn through this book that would let me realize that I, too, am but an amateur in the world of cooking.

Buford learns that one of the first secrets to being an ace chef is being able to cook the same dish the same way each and every time, so that those who come in and enjoy it one night can come in on any other night and still have the dish that they loved so well. From there, the lessons don't get any easier. Moving up from prep to line cook creates its own hazards (literally), but within it all Buford maintains his cool (in his own way) and becomes a student of food. This eventually leads him to take some trips to Italy, where he tries his hand as an apprentice to making pasta and, ultimately, as a butcher. The book leaflet is a little misleading here, for Buford learns more about the proper way to butcher a pig carcass rather than slaughter the pig itself--this is where Buford divides from Bourdain, who wanted to be involved in the actual killing of a pig in his quest to become closer to the food he loves so much. It's hard not to make correlations between Bill Buford and Anthony Bourdain, maybe because both have such a deep respect for food and the craft of making it. Bourdain, of course, speaks from the inside, and that might be his ultimate downfall. His TV appearances are golden, but when translated to the page, books like *Kitchen Confidential* and *A Cook's Tour* have the essence of foodiness that I like, but the pages eventually get rather unreadable. Buford has a very engaging style and is good at developing moments of humor and manicness and pure horror, and the gruff relationships between the cooks seem to go right up the same alley as Buford's previous work with English soccer hooligans. His research into cooking history (for example, when egg was first used in making Italian pasta) is wonderful, though I wasn't so intrigued in his chapters that delved into the histories of some of his colleagues, including Batali. In the later chapters, Buford's writing became almost a little too thick, like (excuse, please) munching constantly on duck in a thick, rich sauce, but then getting a little overwhelmed and wanting a bit more of a respite before being bombarded with another round of deep, deep flavor. In all, this book becomes the story of a foodie's journey into discovering the essence of being a chef and even attaining that, in a way. Though I was a little let down by the ending that suggested a sequel in the guise of conveying a deeper sense of yearning in Buford's curiosity about food, the narrative is quite secure throughout. The ultimate foodie book will be written by someone with the passion and experience of Bourdain, but with the skills and desire for further knowledge of Buford. Right now, this would seem to be the best case scenario we can find, but I hold out hope that there might be another out there who can mix absolutely everything together.

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