

An Evening in the Kitchen with Brooklyn Novelist Monique Truong

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Damijan Saccio

To Southern food scholars, the name Lafcadio Hearn carries weight. He's credited with writing the first cookbook on Creole cuisine, and that's how novelist Monique Truong first heard of him, too. She was looking for an early Southern cornbread recipe while researching for her second novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*, when she came upon his *La Cuisine Creole*, first published in 1885. But when she looked further into Hearn's biography, she learned that he had moved to Japan and was best known for writing about Japanese ghost stories.

"I was like, *Wait, what?*" says Truong. This tidbit piqued her interest in the Greek-Irish writer, whose turn-of-the-20th-century career spanned continents and genres—from reporting in Cincinnati and the French West Indies to writing collections of legends in Japan. He eventually landed in New Orleans, where he wrote his only cookbook. Truong notes that just

a couple months after it was published, The Christian Woman's Exchange of New Orleans published the second Creole cookbook, *The Creole Cookery Book*. It doesn't get quite the same recognition as Hearn's.



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"He's a man writing to teach young women how to cook Creole," says Truong, of his cookbook. "He wrote that men were more rational and scientific, and were therefore better cooks."

Truong's latest novel, *The Sweetest Fruits*, is based on Hearn's life, told through the women who knew him the most. Each section is written from a different point of view: from his mother, Rosa, set in the Greek Ionian island of Lefkada; from his first wife, Alethea Foley, an African-American cook for a guesthouse in Cincinnati; and from his second wife, Setsu, daughter to a samurai family in Japan, with whom he had four children. An absorbing dive into disparate places and societies, the novel illustrates the critical roles women have played in the accomplishments of men. It also offers an intimate portrait of each region's food culture, told through its characters.

"Alethea must have interested him in food," says Truong.



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We're standing in Truong's home kitchen in Brooklyn as she prepares a meal for her husband, Damijan Saccio, and me. I'm peeling ginger at a counter while she adds to a heaping bowl of shredded cabbage, one zip through the food processor shredding disc at a time. On her suggestion, we picked up ingredients at a Japanese grocery, Sunrise Mart, which reminded her of the time she spent living in Japan while on a writers' fellowship for *The Sweetest Fruit*. Truong decided to make a dinner of okonomiyaki, the Japanese pancake loaded with slivered vegetables and pan-fried with bacon (her twist), and as a starter, some plump, raw sea scallops cradled in shiso leaves picked from her garden and sprinkled with flaky salt and lemon juice. Why okonomiyaki? Well, partly because as a diabetic, Truong doesn't eat rice.



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“One of my favorite things in the world is sticky rice,” she says, wistfully recounting a dish that her great-grandmother would make in a clay pot, Vietnamese caramelized pork or *thịt kho tiêu*. “You have to eat a tremendous amount of rice with it.”

Like Hearn, Truong is a multi-faceted writer who has lived all over the world. Born in Vietnam, she grew up with parents who were fluent in French and English, as her father was educated in Europe; her grandfather had a bookstore and publishing business in Saigon, and was a satirist. After the fall of Saigon, her family came to the U.S. as refugees and were sponsored by a rabbit farmer who lived in the tiny town of Boiling Springs, North Carolina. There, she attended grade school and learned to speak English.



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"I didn't understand how I was being seen. My body hadn't changed, my personality hadn't changed... but then thrown into a classroom where I was being mocked, it was like I had become a monster, and it didn't make sense," says Truong.

Later, the family moved to Ohio and then Houston. After attending Yale for undergrad, she moved to New York City to attend Columbia Law School—she is also an intellectual property attorney. Truong has written the novels *The Book of Salt*, about a Vietnamese cook for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, which was lavished with awards; and *Bitter in the Mouth*, which takes us back to Boiling Springs through a character who can "taste" words. Truong wrote the food column, *Ravenous*, in *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*. She also picked up two James Beard Award nominations for contributing to *Gourmet*.

"I'm trying with each project to explore the language of food," she says.



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Though anchored in New York for some time, Truong seems to have an insatiable wanderlust. Over dinner she gushes about a smoked baby shrimp she encountered on a trip to Finland (“so different, yet so familiar!”). She likes to collect a cookbook from every place she visits.

But Truong’s favorite comfort food is rooted firmly in the American South: fried chicken. “It was always something that my mother really liked... when she was pregnant with my sister, she craved fried chicken so we ate Church’s, KFC, and all the fast food,” she says. Her mother never cooked American food, but Truong has perfected her favorite fried chicken at home, learning to cook that and other American dishes from cookbooks. A cookbook shelf near the kitchen table, stuffed with titles from around the world, is only a tiny fraction of her collection.



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In *The Sweetest Fruits*' first section, Rosa describes her demanding hunger pangs while pregnant, too—she craves sea urchins, which she scoops up straight from the shore. Like Truong's mother, Rosa's primal hunger pointed her to what her surroundings bore—perhaps the best of what they offered; it's like our stomachs are hard-wired to scan and select from what's in season, like a market forager.

Hunger is the theme that runs through *The Sweetest Fruits*, according to Truong. While food is garnished liberally throughout the story, it's more about a lust for knowledge, for purpose, for home and family—and for the familiar foods that we crave no matter where we find ourselves. And, because Lafcadio Hearn was so poor when he was young, Truong thinks that his literal hunger helped impress upon him a lifelong interest in food.

"I think that when you have such hunger, physical hunger, you will become obsessed with food," she says.

Truong doesn't want to call *The Sweetest Fruits* a revisionist history of his life; it's more of a "rethinking." She's not trying to change facts, but tell the stories that they bear out, whether or not they've been popular over the years. She also considers herself a political writer, in

both her fiction and non-fiction work.



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“Everyone who touches your food has an intimate relationship with it, so how is it that we as a society... have decided we can devalue everyone that’s been tasked with the labor involved?” she asks, talking about the underpaid immigrant labor force that fuels the US food system. It was the topic of a story she wrote last year in NPR’s *The Salt*. Truong worries about the mental health and happiness of those in the lowest—yet essential—rungs of that system, from the fields to the back of the house.

“I don’t know about you,” she says, scrunching her eyebrows, “But when I’m tired and I feel like crap, the food I make tastes awful.”

I’ve lucked out. Truong is a gracious storyteller and skilled cook as she treats me to a homemade dinner. I feast on a conversation where every bite could feed a year’s worth of more conversations. And the food itself tells a story that I want to remember, and to repeat soon, hopefully with guests.

“Food is really the most tangential day-to-day reminder of history,” says Truong, explaining research tactics for *The Sweetest Fruits*. “You just have to look into it.”