Amazon Exclusive: Kim Sunée Reviews Cherries in Winter

Kim Sunée is the author of the bestselling memoir, Trail of Crumbs: Hunger, Love, and the Search for Home. Sunée has been featured in the New York Times, Ladies’ Homes Journal, People, ELLE, and Glamour. She was the founding food editor of Cottage Living and a former food editor for Southern Living, and she has appeared as a judge on Iron Chef America. Read her exclusive Amazon guest review of Cherries in Winter:

When I started reading Suzan Colón's Cherries in Winter, I didn't know if I should feel relieved that someone had written a book so perfect for coping in these challenging economic times or if it would be better just to lose my sorrows in an entire lemon meringue pie. Luckily, this book allowed me to do both.
Like the author, I lost my dream job as an editor for a national magazine. And like the author, I also spent much of my childhood with my grandfather, spending time in his kitchen, eating his food, and, in my case, listening to stories of his German family and how they arrived in New Orleans.

Every family has stories, Colón writes. ...One only has to reach back and the stories are there, tales of courage and plain dumb luck that make us shake our heads in disbelief and respect for the ones who came before us.

Colón pays respect to several generations of survivors before her; the stories of her relatives are revealed to us through various recipes and moments she spends cooking with her mother. This is a book about food and family and what we inherit from those who came before us. Unlike the author, I did not inherit an entire recipe file of handwritten family favorites and magazine and newspaper clippings of instructions for Mow ‘Em Down Michigan Apple Pie and both an old-fashioned method and a modern recipe for Chicken Pie à la Mississippi.

The book’s first recipe, Suzan's Rigatoni Disoccupati (Pasta of the Unemployed) will provide some comfort to the approximately 500,000 Americans who are newly jobless and negotiating health insurance plans and 401K rollovers. The ingredients, a half pound of spaghetti and a small jar of prepared spaghetti sauce, are common and humble enough that we all have them somewhere in our larders.

I love some of the recipes because of the author’s sense of humor, especially Suzan’s Attempted Split Pea Soup to which she adds hot dogs after too many days of ingesting the same meal and because she doesn’t want to waste the already-opened package. Directions: Marvel at how strangely, surprisingly comforting the hot dog pieces are in the soup, like something a kid would get for lunch. Feel that somehow, all will be okay.

In spite of shrinking 401ks and the sound of pennies dropping into a metal can, Suzan shares with us her deep resolve that if we love one another, feed our souls as well as our bodies, things can only get better. Cherries in Winter includes words of wisdom we’ve heard from our own mothers and grandmothers, but they get a new life here and we pay attention. This is a book about defying poverty not of the wallet but of the soul. And one example--spending a little extra to relish the joy of being in Manhattan in Central Park and eating cherries in winter--teaches us the importance of spending a little more to help keep ourselves from feeling like less.

The women in my family, Colón writes, have certain traits: height, prominent noses, and the ability to rationalize spending extra, just once in a while, when there is no extra to be spent... I got some of their height and all of the nose, but I thought the last characteristic was missing in me. It
wasn’t: I just didn’t realize that it only wakes up when we begin to measure ourselves by money, or the lack of it. It’s not a reflexive kick of denial about having less. It’s a deep breath reminding us not to become miserly in spirit. We may be broke, but we’re not poor.

Suzan reminds us that these stories and recipes offer more than directions for making the comfort food that sustained my family for four generations. They’re artifacts from times both good and bad—not vague references, but proof that we’ve been through worse than this and have come out okay. And right now, that’s something I need to know.

I don’t know how books help us, but when reading Cherries in Winter, you will feel a little less alone in these uncertain times. Suzan Colón’s book will make you want to head to the kitchen with a favorite relative in hopes that you, too, will learn a thing or two, if not about your family then about yourself, about your own hunger and resilience. Colón’s journey helps us remember to celebrate the simple things, like how, in the deep of winter, summer fruit can still taste its brightest. --Kim Sunée

(Photo © EunHo Lee)

Suzan Colón on Cherries in Winter  My mother is a brilliant storyteller, especially of our family’s history. Around the holidays, she can have me in tears from laughing and crying, sometimes simultaneously. There’s no shortage of material—our family is an interesting bunch—and Mom’s delivery is almost stage-perfect. She could read a shopping list and turn it into tragic comedy.

When I got the idea to write these stories in what would become Cherries in Winter: My Family’s Recipe for Hope in Hard Times, I was cooking meatloaf with my mother. I had been laid off and had to economize, and Mom suggested I dig out Nana’s recipe file from the basement. In it, I found instructions for making good, simple food from many years of challenging times that my family had faced. I started making the recipes with Mom, and she’d tell the stories behind them.

I tried writing down what she said, but I lost all the flavor of the way she said it. Next I brought my tape recorder; Mom was initially a little shy, but she soon forgot the little machine was running—especially when I hid it behind the onions.

When I transcribed the tapes, I had more questions. What year was that? How old were you when this happened? What was Nana wearing? Where were my great-grandparents living then? A lot of our family stories, like our recipes, have been passed down through generations, and some of the details have been lost. I don’t know, Mom would say, trying to remember things she hadn’t been told since she was a little girl.
Later, I’d read my notes and see big blanks in my family’s past. It was like having parts of photographs, or a treasured quilt missing squares. I wished my Nana were still alive so she could tell me where she’d been, what she’d been thinking and feeling.

Then I remembered--though I know that isn’t the right or best word for something that came to me, rather than from me--that there had been another box with the old recipe file. I’d been so excited about finding the recipe folder that I hadn’t bothered to look at what was next to it.

I ran down to the basement again, opened the second box, and found the key to my family’s history. In beautiful script and nearly perfect typing, on stationery, work letterhead, and even envelopes, Nana told me our stories. She’d written essays about meeting the father who never admitted she was his. She described my great-great-grandparents in lyrical detail. I read her voice, and it was as though Nana was saying...

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**Personal Review: Cherries in Winter: My Family's Recipe for Hope in Hard Times by Suzan Colon**

I received a free copy of Cherries in Winter from Random House and I am so thankful for that. I have never read a book that "hit the spot" about me and my life and especially the way I want my family and myself to live our lives more than this. What a story! Hard times hit everyone in some way or another and this book gives such encouragement on how to handle it and how to survive it. I look forward to reading more books from Suzan Colon. I sure hope she will write another book continuing off of this one! Awesome book!! Thank you so much for sharing your life with us!