



A taste for chefs' memoirs

The appeal of these often remarkably similar tales of kitchen hijinks has very little to do with food



Sharply observed ... Anthony Bourdain in 2000. Photograph: David Rentas / Rex Features

As with many genres, chefs' memoirs – these hard-boiled tales of "sex and chopping" – are instantly recognisable by their covers. The formula that seems to have begun with [Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential*](#) continues with [Marco Pierre White's *The Devil in the Kitchen*](#) and, most recently, [Cooking Dirty](#), by [Jason Sheehan](#) (who is notable within the genre for his relatively low status as a cook – Sheehan is a successful food writer and multiple [James Beard award](#)-winner, but was never especially successful as a chef). A black-and-white photo of the chef in his whites, holding a somewhat threatening looking knife, glowers from under big, block lettering in black and red. And the blurbs are scattered with references to dope, drink, and deep fat fryers.

Of course, the common ground shared by these books isn't visible only on the book jackets. They're all stuffed equally full of anecdotes about terrible injuries inflicted by vats of boiling fat, signing for deliveries of cocaine and heroin at the same time as ones of fresh fish and vegetables, three-pack-a-day cigarette habits and some pretty revolting details (Sheehan describes the chefs' practice of "making pancakes" – pouring cornflour down their trousers to soak up the sweat, the phrase describing the resulting pats that form around the genitals).

A recent offshoot of this genre is that of chef-'sleb memoir – Gordon Ramsay's *Humble Pie* and *Playing With Fire*, or *Driven* by James Martin, for example. The covers of these books reflect the entirely different slant of their contents – close-ups of the chef's faces, smiling rather than glowering; bright backgrounds; snappy suits. The focus here is firmly on the fame, with the kitchen bringing up second place – perhaps even third, to the tale of their difficult but uplifting childhood (in the harder-edged memoirs, the chefs' childhoods tend to be viewed through a sharper lens. In *Cooking Dirty*, Sheehan tells a story about a gift his mother gave him as a rebellious teenager, as part of her attempts to get him to stop smoking: a pack of Marlboro Reds, with a picture of his dead grandfather laid out in his coffin glued to the inside of the lid. On each cigarette she had written, carefully, in biro, 'Hi, Grandpa!'). These are books about celebrities who happen to be chefs.

What the two types have in common is that neither of them are really about food. It's not entirely invisible, but if you're after detailed descriptions of dishes, you'd be better off looking to writers such as Ruth Reichl or Jeffrey Steingarten, to name but two. These books are about the life: the highly-pressurised atmosphere that exists in professional kitchens; the camaraderie that grows between a group of guys (and it is mostly guys) who are cooking on the line. They're about hard work and harder partying. They're war stories.

Which is perhaps a big part of the reason why they're appealing to readers who aren't cooks themselves, who aren't even that interested in food. A friend of mine devoured *Kitchen Confidential*, despite the fact that her freezer is usually fully stocked with ready meals, and she eats out only occasionally. Why? Because, like the best books of any genre, when done well, these memoirs and biographies open the door to a world that's normally closed to us; they let us peer beyond the pass, into the smoke- and steam-filled kitchen to catch a glimpse of the weary chef wiping his knife on his apron as he prepares his *mise-en-place*; or bloodying his knuckles in a brawl with the potwasher.

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22 April 2010 7:54PM

I have worked in a lot of kitchens and the Bourdain thing rang true. I have also worked for a lot of bosses like him, which partly explains why I got out (so for that matter did he).

As far as dead-end jobs go, being a cinema usher beats being a cook any day of the week. You work 15 minutes or so out of every 2 hours, see films and hang out and chat (especially in old-fashioned big one or two screen cinemas, not so much the case with pokey multiscreens). In a kitchen there is constant stooping, wet feet and tiredness, which unlike the tiredness of construction work isn't the result of getting stronger. There is non-stop shouting, bitching and humiliation and dirt and smells that linger in your skin, hair and clothes for what seems like years.

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28 April 2010 10:02AM

Not much of a surprise that the books aren't about food. Pretty obviously they're about the restaurant business.

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