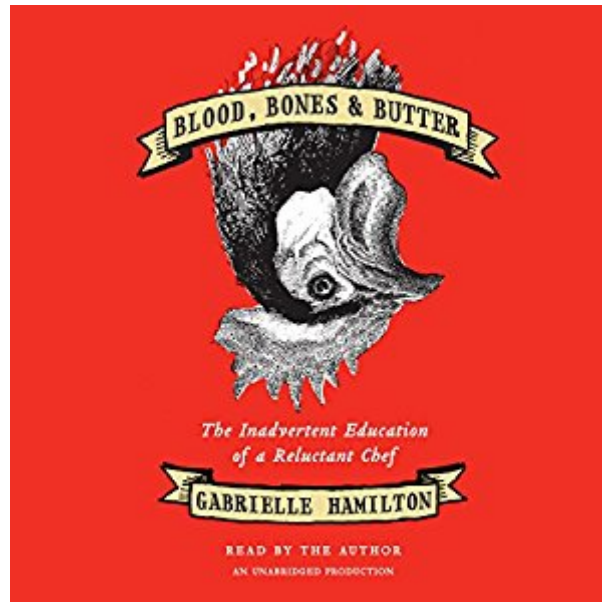


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Blood, Bones & Butter: The Inadvertent Education Of A Reluctant Chef



Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A memoir written by a chef is appealing because it promises to take us to a place few of us ever see, unless it's on the Food Network---that is, a restaurant kitchen. It promises to reveal all of the gritty, unlovely steps leading up to the moment when the beautiful plate emerges from the pass and into the hands of the waitstaff. In addition, after Anthony Bourdain led the way, such a memoir must also offer appetite-killers: dirty walk-ins, unsavory butchering scenes. And, like a religious testament, it also has those conversion moments, the moment when the chef discovers that she or he is destined to become an artist with food. Gabrielle Hamilton's memoir has all of these elements. When Hamilton writes about food, she's entertaining, irreverent, and even spiritual. Her engaging account of her father's spring lamb roast (an edited version of this piece recently appeared in *The New Yorker*) establishes the origins of her love of food. Her account of her years working for catering companies will make you think hard before you pick up that next wedding hors d'oeuvre from the waiter's silver plate. And a chapter about cooking at a summer camp in the Berkshires is funny and deft in its handling of detail. I loved her wry depiction of the time she spent in a master's writing program, from the satirical descriptions of her fellow writers to her homage to Misty, a fellow cook and, for Hamilton, a kind of culinary muse. This book aspires to be more than just a chef memoir, however, since the subtitle refers to "The Inadvertent Education of a Reluctant Chef." In particular, this is a book about family: about Hamilton's own family, painfully riven by divorce when she was still a child, and about her marriage and the birth of her two sons.

"Slowly the meadow filled with people and fireflies and laughter -- just as my father had imagined -- and the lambs on their spits were hoisted off the pit onto the shoulders of men, like in a funeral procession, and set down on the makeshift plywood-on-sawhorse tables to be carved. Then the sun started to set and we lit the paper bag luminaria, which burned soft glowing amber, punctuating the meadow and the night, and the lamb was crisp-skinned and sticky from slow roasting, and the root beer was frigid and caught, like an emotion, in the back of my throat." Gabrielle Hamilton looks back on her nine-year-old self in that passage -- over-the-moon infatuated with her older siblings, her mother's way in the kitchen and her father's way with setting a stage ... and unaware that divorce and neglect are just around the corner. By 13, she's drugging with an older crowd and lying about her age to get work in restaurant kitchens to support herself; before long she's participating in a felony-level employee theft racket. Yet she has a knack for stumbling onto cooking mentors and gradually learns enough to run the kitchen at a kids' summer camp and freelance-cook at high-volume caterers for fancy Hamptons (NY) parties. She completes a fiction-writing MFA, but only because she simultaneously finds a wellspring of sanity and true creativity in a side cooking job that recalls the down-to-earth food and settings of her childhood. And it's with that "real food" perspective that she eventually opens a restaurant -- New York City's acclaimed Prune. There's evidence of that MFA in this memoir -- a beautiful mix of literary and culinary creativity.

I really enjoyed the first two sections of *Blood, Bones & Butter*. These are the parts of the book where Ms. Hamilton tells us about her non-traditional childhood and how she came to start her own restaurant. There's a flow to these sections, and the writing can be incredibly beautiful at times. Even if the author comes across as an angry teenager, even into her twenties, you know there is one more section for the author to find herself and enlightenment. And you can even understand why she might be the way she is as she grows up. But then you get to the third section, which is basically a diatribe on how much she hates her mother and her husband. Ms. Hamilton sounds like a very confused, very angry woman. She spends most of her adult life as a lesbian, but then somehow decides it's a good idea to marry a man she hardly knows because the wedding will be like a piece of performance art for her friends to watch. Then, when her husband doesn't read her mind every second, she blows up, throwing profanity-laced accusations at him. I just kept hearing the same phrase in my head while reading: why doesn't she just tell him what she wants??? She also continually laments that five or seven years later, he's no longer taking her on romantic motorcycle rides. Does she ask him to? Nope. I also think it's strange that the two don't actually

move in together until they have been married for multiple years and have two children, and then she doesn't understand why her marriage is failing and they don't get along. Her husband must have had the patience of a saint because I would have put up with her for about 2 weeks. And don't get me started on her poor mother. I STILL don't understand what the woman did, other than want her daughter to love her.

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