

Books

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A MAJOR
NEW VOICE

Recipe for Success

Stephanie Danler mined years of working as a waitress for her delicious, behind-the-scenes restaurant novel, *Sweetbitter*.
BY ISABELLA BIEDENHARN

Two hours into our dinner at the intimate, candlelit West Village bistro Buvette, Stephanie Danler pushes aside her glass of rosé and plate of steak tartare on toast to write me a reading list, carefully dividing it into fiction, nonfiction, and—her favorite—poetry.

The 32-year-old author and current L.A. resident, whose exquisite debut novel, *Sweetbitter*—the coming-of-age story of 22-year-old Tess—is out May 24, is brimming with recommendations on a diverse array of subjects, from wine (rosé is “not a weakness, it’s a lifestyle choice”) to keeping your sanity in New York City: “My strategy for living here for 10 years was to leave every



three months, even for a weekend,” Danler advises. “I think nature’s important.”

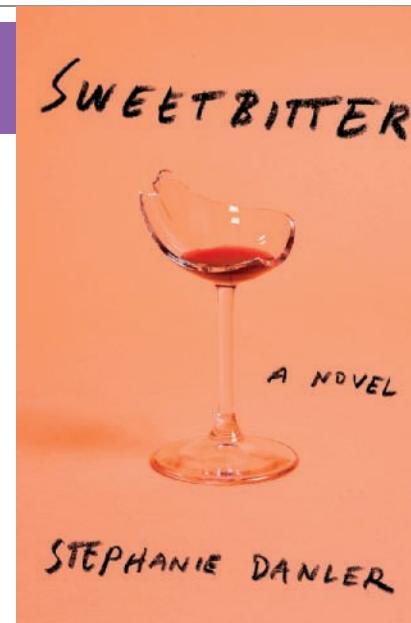
Danler is clearly a person of purposeful choices: Even without dining with her, it’s evident from the crisp, deliberate first lines of *Sweetbitter*. “You will develop a palate,” the protagonist says, musing to a notion of her younger self. “A palate is a spot on your tongue where you remember. Where you

assign words to the textures of taste. Eating becomes a discipline, language-obsessed. You will never simply eat food again.”

After *Sweetbitter* sold to Knopf for a reported high-six-figure, two-book deal in late 2014, *The New York Times* wrote a story about how Danler was working as a waitress at Buvette when she wowed a regular customer, Random House editor at large Peter

Gethers, with a draft of her novel. It’s a nice story, and Danler is quick to acknowledge that, technically, it’s true. She *did* wait on Gethers, and he *did* receive her manuscript. But the overnight-success fairy tale isn’t exactly right. “The story whitewashed a lot of my hard work,” she says. “The first thing I thought was ‘I was the general manager of a f---ing restaurant for seven years!’”

Back in 2006, Danler started as a back waiter at Union Square Cafe, just like *Sweetbitter*’s earnest young heroine. Eventually she worked her way up to manager at other New York hot spots. Although she moved to the city after college with dreams of becoming a novelist, Danler loved everything about the burgeoning restaurant scene and was completely satisfied with the life she’d built—until she realized those 70-hour workweeks weren’t leaving her much time to write. So she entered the M.F.A. program at Manhattan’s New School, where she focused on nothing but *Sweetbitter*. And to conserve her energy, she returned to just waiting tables.



After the *Times* article, Danler received a flurry of messages on social media. “There was a lot of ‘You must be so happy,’ which I’ve come to have a conflicted relationship with,” she says. “I am so happy, and these are huge moments, but your life doesn’t change overnight. People would say, ‘Can you believe it?’ And I would say, ‘I went to graduate school to write. Yes, I can believe that my book’s being published. I took out all these loans!’”

For now, Danler is enjoying the unknown. She’s writing essays and another novel, and catching up with friends—something that nine years of Saturday shifts made it hard to do. Her next move? “I will definitely be involved with a restaurant again,” she says, after greeting an old co-worker who stops by the table. Warm and inviting, Danler is clearly a natural at hospitality. She adds, “I still understand in my bones how this business works.”

“YES, I CAN BELIEVE MY BOOK’S BEING PUBLISHED. I TOOK OUT ALL THESE LOANS BECAUSE I BELIEVED IT!”

DANLER: NICK VORDERMAN

▶ BETWEEN THE LINES

George R.R. Martin posted a new *Winds of Winter*

excerpt on his website (but still no release date!). •

Empire star Taraji P. Henson announced that her mem-

oir, *Around the Way Girl*, will hit shelves Oct. 11, 2016.

Sweetbitter

BY Stephanie Danler | PAGES 352 | GENRE Fiction

REVIEW BY Leah Greenblatt @Leahbats

▶ “DOES ANYONE COME TO NEW YORK clean?” *Sweetbitter*’s 22-year-old narrator asks in the novel’s opening pages. Like countless girls before her, Tess arrives in Manhattan looking not just to find herself but to get lost. Unlike most of them, though, she has no grand plans to conquer fashion or publishing or finance—only an overwhelming urge to trade the nothingness of her nameless hometown for “the one place large enough to hold so much unbridled, unfocused desire.”

Aiming for nothing more than anonymity and an easy paycheck, she walks into what she’s been told is the best restaurant in Manhattan and lands a trainee spot as a bottom-rung back waiter, far removed from the clamoring glamour of the dining room’s front lines. Even that starter position is a stretch; Tess is so green that she’s never tasted an oyster or an heirloom tomato—let alone the Sancerre and cocaine that become a near-nightly ritual once the staff welcomes her into the blurred, blazing hours of their post-shift social lives. But every week she learns a little bit more, and the job becomes her key to the city: a daily master class in sex, drugs, and chanterelles.

An endless roundelay of rivalries and crushes—she is enthralled by both a taciturn tattooed bartender named Jake and his best friend, Simone, a sophisticated older server—propel the story forward, though those intrigues ultimately resonate less than Tess’ sensual awakening to food: creamy, ash-dusted cheeses; anchovies drenched in olive oil; dense, fleshy figs like “a slap from another sun-soaked world.” That’s the book’s true romance—the heady first taste of self-discovery, bitter and salty and sweet. **A- E C A**