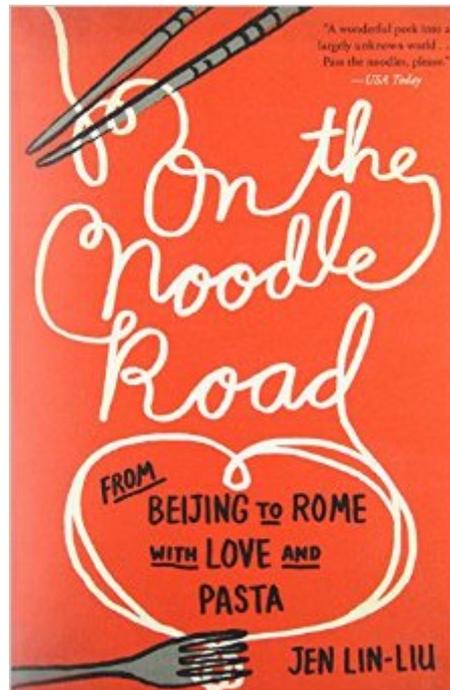


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On The Noodle Road: From Beijing To Rome, With Love And Pasta



Synopsis

A food writer travels the Silk Road, immersing herself in a moveable feast of foods and cultures and discovering some surprising truths about commitment, independence, and love. As a newlywed traveling in Italy, Jen Lin-Liu was struck by culinary echoes of the delicacies she ate and cooked back in China, where she'd lived for more than a decade. Who really invented the noodle? she wondered, like many before her. But also: How had food and culture moved along the Silk Road, the ancient trade route linking Asia to Europe—and what could still be felt of those long-ago migrations? With her new husband's blessing, she set out to discover the connections, both historical and personal, eating a path through western China and on into Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, and across the Mediterranean. The journey takes Lin-Liu into the private kitchens where the headscarves come off and women not only knead and simmer but also confess and confide. The thin rounds of dough stuffed with meat that are dumplings in Beijing evolve into manti in Turkey—their tiny size the measure of a bride's worth—and end as tortellini in Italy. And as she stirs and samples, listening to the women talk about their lives and longings, Lin-Liu gains a new appreciation of her own marriage, learning to savor the sweetness of love freely chosen.

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Customer Reviews

I chose this book because it combined a bit of anthropology and history with food, specifically a quest to figure out not only the origin of noodles but how they traveled from China to Europe. A quarter of the way through, however, I groaned as I realized that the book was going to be as much

about the author's ambivalence about marriage and gender roles as it was food. While I think the former topics are worthy, that wasn't what I thought I had signed up for. I persevered, however, and I came to see why that subject was highlighted: as the author journeyed from China through Central Asia, the women she encountered were held to a standard many Americans (myself included) would find harshly sexist. I was most disturbed by her account of the otherwise kind man in Turkmenistan who laughed about the way he expected his wife to stay silent in front of male guests and that she and other female family members sit outside in the cold while the men dined with guests. Tradition, as the author notes, is one thing when it comes to food but another when it comes to relationships. Most irksome for a modern woman who enjoys cooking is the way most of the women the author encounters on her journey feel about cooking: it is something that is expected of them and many do it well, but it is not something they *enjoy*. It's a job requirement... and that job "wife". At the end of the book, the author concludes that the way to make sure that traditional food endures as women's roles change is to involve men in the kitchen- and this has to start when they are young. While a revolution in Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan may be difficult to coordinate, American parents can begin immediately. The food- not only noodles, but also rice dishes and desserts- were described in tantalizing detail.

No, Marco Polo did not bring pasta back to Italy from his travels in China. That's a popular myth. But there are striking similarities between the culinary specialties of Western China, Central Asia, Turkey and Italy. How did this happen? Author Jen Lin-Liu asked herself this question at some length and decided to explore the matter on foot, as it were, traversing the ancient Silk Road in a grand culinary tour. But this was more than a research project about food. It was also a quest--for self-understanding, identity, her role as a woman and a wife, and the meaning of her marriage. Born an American of Chinese descent, she later spent several years in China, speaks the language, but never feels completely identified with either country. I don't know how good Lin-Liu is as a cook, but she is brilliant at networking, gets herself invited into homes and kitchens all over Eurasia, hangs out with the women who slave in those kitchens, learns about their inner lives, and marvels at the cultural diffusion of foods and language and customs. The writing is not polished but conversational, engaging and enjoyable. She has no literary pretensions. She talks about the people in the kitchen, befriends them and helps us understand them. What a wealth of insight and personal connection. In the process of this quest she questions and comes to accept the concept of wife, of being married. Yes, she will work in some kitchen, somewhere, but on her own terms and because she wants to. By the way, her husband accompanied her on long sections of the quest, and dealt with many of the

same issues. So the end result was a journey of mutual discovery for both. The book also includes a number of recipes, which this reviewer can't comment upon. Some foodies are sure to love them.

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