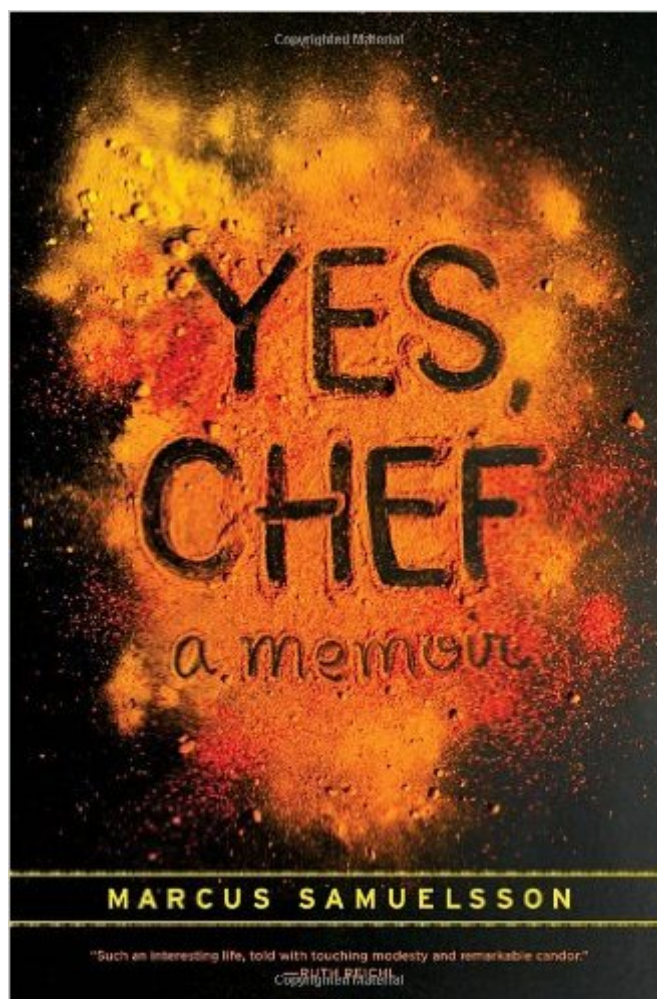


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Yes, Chef: A Memoir



Synopsis

JAMES BEARD AWARD NOMINEE • NAMED ONE OF THE TEN BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY VOGUE • A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • "One of the great culinary stories of our time." —Dwight Garner, *The New York Times* • It begins with a simple ritual: Every Saturday afternoon, a boy who loves to cook walks to his grandmother's house and helps her prepare a roast chicken for dinner. The grandmother is Swedish, a retired domestic. The boy is Ethiopian and adopted, and he will grow up to become the world-renowned chef Marcus Samuelsson. This book is his love letter to food and family in all its manifestations.

• Marcus Samuelsson was only three years old when he, his mother, and his sister "all battling tuberculosis" walked seventy-five miles to a hospital in the Ethiopian capital city of Addis Ababa. Tragically, his mother succumbed to the disease shortly after she arrived, but Marcus and his sister recovered, and one year later they were welcomed into a loving middle-class white family in Göteborg, Sweden. It was there that Marcus's new grandmother, Helga, sparked in him a lifelong passion for food and cooking with her pan-fried herring, her freshly baked bread, and her signature roast chicken. From a very early age, there was little question what Marcus was going to be when he grew up.

• Yes, *Chef* chronicles Marcus Samuelsson's remarkable journey from Helga's humble kitchen to some of the most demanding and cutthroat restaurants in Switzerland and France, from his grueling stints on cruise ships to his arrival in New York City, where his outsize talent and ambition finally come together at Aquavit, earning him a coveted New York Times three-star rating at the age of twenty-four. But Samuelsson's career of "chasing flavors," as he calls it, had only just begun.

• In the intervening years, there have been White House state dinners, career crises, reality show triumphs and, most important, the opening of the beloved Red Rooster in Harlem. At Red Rooster, Samuelsson has fulfilled his dream of creating a truly diverse, multiracial dining room "a place where presidents and prime ministers rub elbows with jazz musicians, aspiring artists, bus drivers, and nurses. It is a place where an orphan from Ethiopia, raised in Sweden, living in America, can feel at home."

• With disarming honesty and intimacy, Samuelsson also opens up about his failures "the price of ambition, in human terms" and recounts his emotional journey, as a grown man, to meet the father he never knew. Yes, *Chef* is a tale of personal discovery, unshakable determination, and the passionate, playful pursuit of flavors "one man's struggle to find a place for himself in the kitchen, and in the world."

• Praise for *Yes, Chef* • "Such an interesting life, told with touching modesty and remarkable candor." —Ruth Reichl • "Marcus Samuelsson has an incomparable story, a quiet bravery, and a lyrical and discreetly glittering style" in the kitchen and on the page. I liked this book so very, very much." —Gabrielle Hamilton • "Plenty of celebrity

chefs have a compelling story to tell, but none of them can top [this] one.” The Wall Street Journal
“Red Rooster”’s arrival in Harlem brought with it a chef who has reinvigorated and reimagined what it means to be American. In his famed dishes, and now in this memoir, Marcus Samuelsson tells a story that reaches past racial and national divides to the foundations of family, hope, and downright good food.” President Bill Clinton

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Two reviews of a berbere spice mixture from an otherwise first rate North African spice purveyor caught my eye because they were harshly critical of its make up. There was only one chef who immediately came to mind, the redoubtable Marcus Samuelsson. His recent volume, "The Soul of a New Cuisine" (apologies to Tracy Kidder) had the truth of the matter. Why go to a Swede for Ethiopian authenticity? That answer lies in this volume of his memoirs. The great former Chef de Cuisine for New York's Aquavit is Ethiopian. His adopting parents are Swedes. Chef Samuelsson prepares quite a story. His voice is as clear as a glass of aquavit and his adventures as pungent as that berbere paste. He is an honest raconteur with little use for devices or manipulation. Rarely do you see full acknowledgement given to the ghost writer, including her own title. Veronica Chambers has done a nice job of getting the book out and not getting in the way. He peers into the past without benefit of photographs or letters, but with a healthy mistrust of his own memory and even of the politeness of his people. He tells us the tale of an Ethiopian village patriarch, or "Abba", yes, just like in Sweden. He has an easier time going back a few generations in Sweden. It was his grandmother

that seeded his food memories. "Mormor" was a maid and domestic cook. She salted her chicken right after plucking, then cooling and drying in the cellar. So Chef Samuelsson speaks of putting chickens by the air conditioner to help dry the skin. Most do not know that you cannot properly roast a soggy bird. She nests it on a bed of carrot, rubs with spice and sews it up with an apple, an onion. Eat that chicken, as Mingus would sing. Without sentimentality, Chef Samuelsson has genuine affection for his family of insanely larger-than-life Swedes. Like moonshine making Uncle Torsten, "... a strong old man. Freaky Strong. Farmer Strong... Even after he'd retired from fishing, he could lift an eka, a stout wooden rowboat, and flip it onto its blocks, by himself..." Lucky for us, young Marcus was fifty pounds lighter than many of his fellow footballers, suggesting to himself he opt for learning English and cooking. There has been a spate of chef coming of age books lately; a couple of them are even good. Most read more like screenplay wanabees, but I do not recall any being filmed. Recipes are all the formula we need. Too many of these books are witheringly formulaic - cookie cutter on an aching slow conveyer belt. The marketing blurbs usually emphasize their "me too" strategy. But Chef Samuelsson is having none of that predictable melodrama of tragedy and triumph, complete with evil chefs dancing on young graves and all that. Instead, you get fairly honest memoirs without moralizing or posturing. He gives himself the occasional dope slap; sometimes he calls out the lout. He leaves recipes to his trio of cookbooks. But he weaves his observations on food into the flow. Here is one moment of illumination from his Garde Manger station in Switzerland under a top sous-chef: The first time Giggs handed me a felt-tipped marker and told me to cover a plate in plastic wrap, I thought he'd gone off the deep end. "Draw your food," he commanded, by which he meant he wanted the vegetables artfully arranged. "If you've arranged your veggies beautifully," he explained, "when it gets to the meat guy, he will respect the plate more. He won't just push everything aside to get his fillet on there". That pretty much reflects what Chef Samuelsson has done with his book.

While I haven't eaten any of Samuelsson's food, I have read his cookbooks, watched him on TV, and followed his career. His life story is intriguing and unexpected and I'm so glad he write this engaging, well-written, and frank memoir. You won't find celebrity gossip, high crimes, or scandal here and that's part of what makes it good. What you will find is a man at the prime of his life reflecting on it and on what brought him to this point. Samuelsson's life story is worth hearing. Born in Ethiopia, he was orphaned, along with his older sister, as a toddler after his mother died of TB. They both were adopted by a Swedish family and he learned to cook at his grandmother's side. After doing a culinary program in high school and working at a local restaurant, he went to

Switzerland and began the long, hard process of becoming a chef. Fast forward a few years and he went to New York to work at Aquavit, a Swedish restaurant. There he became executive chef, earned three stars from the New York Times and won a James Beard Award. Most recently he opened Red Rooster in Harlem. Those are the bare bones of his story, which he amplifies throughout the book. It's so delightful and so well-written I found myself saying "just one more chapter . . ." Samuelsson is quick to acknowledge the debt he owes to his family, his friends, and the chefs he's worked for. That's one of the best things about the book. It's such a wonderful portrait of a man who has worked hard, but hasn't forgotten what brought him to this point, who he is, or what made him into the man he became. And how many memoirs can show us that?

I was excited to read this book and see how Marcus became the man he is today. Problem is, the more I learned about him, the more I saw how selfish, arrogant, and self-absorbed he is. I want to cry for his daughter who became the innocent victim of his self-seeking desires. Usually memoirs, even of dislikable people, paint them in a good light. This book shows us the real Marcus, and it's not a picture I admire. I wanted to like him, so, if you have a favorable impression of him and want to keep it that way, don't read this book.

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