



Soy Sauce for Beginners

Kirstin Chen

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Gretchen Lin, adrift at the age of thirty, leaves her floundering marriage in San Francisco to move back to her childhood home in Singapore and immediately finds herself face-to-face with the twin headaches she's avoided her entire adult life: her mother's drinking problem and the machinations of her father's artisanal soy sauce business.

Surrounded by family, Gretchen struggles with the tension between personal ambition and filial duty, but still finds time to explore a new romance with the son of a client, an attractive man of few words. When an old American friend comes to town, the two of them are pulled into the controversy surrounding Gretchen's cousin, the only male grandchild and the heir apparent to Lin's Soy Sauce. In the midst of increasing pressure from her father to remain permanently in Singapore—and pressure from her mother to do just the opposite—Gretchen must decide whether she will return to her marriage and her graduate studies at the San Francisco Conservatory, or sacrifice everything and join her family's crusade to spread artisanal soy sauce to the world.

Soy Sauce for Beginners reveals the triumphs and sacrifices that shape one woman's search for a place to call home, and the unexpected art and tradition behind the brewing of a much-used but unsung condiment. The result is a foodie love story that will give readers a hearty appreciation for family loyalty and fresh starts.

Soy Sauce for Beginners Details

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From Reader Review Soy Sauce for Beginners for online ebook

Angela Risner says

This was my Prime memberships free book choice and I have to say, it was a good one. This is Kirstin Chen's debut novel and I look forward to reading more from this author in the future.

Gretchen Lin is at what I call the second-coming-of-age point in your life - age 30. A native Singaporean, Gretchen has spent a large part of her life in the US, through boarding school, college, graduate school and married life. Now she returns home for some breathing room from her troubled marriage and career plans. However, home holds its own issues, as Gretchen's mother is in kidney failure and her family's business, Lin's Soy Sauce, is at a critical turning point.

First off, I didn't know that there was such a thing as artisanal soy sauce, and I now desperately want to taste some. Second of all, I craved Asian cuisine through this entire book.

Beyond that, it was just a well-written story. I found Gretchen to be a complex yet relatable character. She is smart, talented, and still has a screwed up life at the moment. In short: she's normal. Even when you do everything "right," life is messy. I liked Gretchen's parents as well. They were also complex, full of faults, but clear in their devotion to their only child.

Where does your duty to family end? Is it when you create your own? Of course, there are different cultures at work here, too. The duty of family is different in America than it is in other countries.

Highly recommend.

Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says

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I bought this book without reading the summary because at the time it was on sale for \$1.99 down from \$4.99. Later, when I was trying to decide which Kindle book I wanted to read next, I really took a look at the summary and my heart sank a little when I saw that it was - *gasp, cringe* - "women's fiction."

To my surprise, I actually really enjoyed SOY SAUCE FOR BEGINNERS. Part of that is the heroine herself. I wasn't sure how well I'd be able to relate to a Singaporean woman caught between two very different cultures. She was born in Singapore but is the heir to an old and reputable soy sauce company. She's separated from her husband, who cheated on her with a college student, and experiencing a lot of distress over what she wants to do with her life and where her loyalties and energies should lie.

Gretchen starts off very childish and petty, but over the course of the novel, she grows into herself. I really enjoyed watching her take ownership for her mistakes. I loved her relationship with her family - her mother, her father, her uncle. It was clear how much she loved them, and how much they loved her, and ordinarily relationship-driven books make me roll my eyes because they tend to be corny, but Gretchen's love for her family reminded me of the love I have for mine. I especially appreciated the emphasis on forgiveness & duty. They helped her become a better person, and vice versa.

Also, the food descriptions in this book are off-the-charts:

An avant-garde chef in Chicago had infused the soy sauce into butter. The resulting concoction was spread on bite-sized brioche, topped with tobiko caviar, and served as the AMUSE BOUCHE to his seventeen-course tasting menu (35%).

...our entire table was covered in food: an earthenware ramekin of pearly-pink prawns bathed in garlic butter; translucent, paper-thin slices of cured ham fanned out on the plate; tortilla espanola with nuggets of potato and sweet onion; candy-stripe beets studded with goat cheese and almond slivers; slow-cooked short ribs almost silky in their tenderness; thick chorizo stew (38%).

...crispy eel in sweet sauce, smoked duck two ways, hand-pulled noodles with crab roe...squirrel-shaped Mandarin fish, eight treasure rice, four happiness pork (68%).

What an unexpected gem this was.

4.5 stars!

Jay says

I accidentally pushed a button on the Itouch and next thing I knew I'd ordered this pre-release. Figure I might as well read it, maybe it was serendipity.

Shanna Clark says

To be a debut novel, this one has it's strengths, but there are also many weaknesses.

The protagonist in the story is not a likable person. She has no self-esteem, but seems to be shocked when people do not regard her. It's contradictory and frustrating. Only toward the end of the novel does she become a tolerable character after completely changing all facets of her needy, whiny personality.

The story would be moving along strongly before pausing for a flashback or anecdote. Some of the flashbacks would be completely irrelevant, and I found myself asking, "Another one of these? Now?" Some were interesting and applied to the story, but others, I wasn't sure what the point was.

The story also ends rather abruptly with a lot of loose ends left unresolved. It's not really a sequel-worthy story, but I wonder what happens to certain characters and story lines.

Aside from that, the characters and their feelings are relatable. I love Gretchen's mother. I would have much rather read about Ba and Ma's story than Gretchen's, at times. They seem to have an intricate, balanced relationship that has seen it's share of weathering. The characters did leave me wanting more, and that's why the unresolved story lines bother me so.

The description of the soy sauce was always interesting and added a nice depth to the story. The company's importance as a family entity was engaging and made sense.

The story did have it's strong points, but due to some flaws, I cannot give the story above three stars and would only give it two-and-a-half if I could.

Heather says

I couldn't put it down! It felt like I was reading someone's journal. If you have ever experienced moving away and then coming back home, you would certainly identify with Gretchen's story. I love how the author weaved in the intricacies of making good soy sauce. She didn't just write a beautiful story, she made me care about what happened to each character. Pick this book up, you won't be disappointed!

Gary Singh says

As a dude who doesn't think this is chick lit, I loved the book. Just like me, it's half-eastern and half-western, with the other half lost in music school somewhere. I didn't go to the SF Conservatory, but I think I still might have the key to the practice rooms at the university where I did go, even though that was 16 years ago, and not too far away. In that sense, I feel like I know Gretchen, the protagonist. She has no idea what she wants in life, stuck between her eastern half and her western half, and, just like me, wondering if she squandered her potential in music academia. Due to all of this, she simply can't figure life out, hangs out with all the wrong people who can't relate, and suffers as a result. Some people remain in that state for many, many years, myself included. In that sense, she was totally real. What's more, just like her, I grew up with an alcoholic parent, so I know exactly what it's like, except mine didn't make it. Even better, here in the Bay Area, I've known quite a few Asiaphile perverts who resemble that Paul character almost exactly. It's pretty

mainstream, to be honest. In fact, I almost turned into one of those dudes myself, even though that was 16 years ago.

On another note, there's one line, when she's alone at the party, outside, and that James idiot comes over and says, "So if you know everyone, why are you out here all by yourself?"

In my sphere of influence, a zillion people know me, but I have very, very few close friends, so I've had that same exchange--or one eerily similar--many times. It feels like people are always saying things like that to me. Again, I feel like I know this protagonist.

In any event, all of the above probably doesn't gel with housewives glued to Oprah, or the nauseating book-club bores who didn't connect with this story on the level I did. I honestly can't understand how many of the negative reviews are interpreting Gretchen as "whiny" or "complaining." I would never have seen her that way. Sure, the whole thing verges on chick lit at times, but that didn't distract me in the least bit. I was just in Singapore a year ago, so the whole thing was refreshing, aside from learning a lot about soy sauce.

Patty McCormick says

This book is a quick read. It is easy to follow and understand. It is the struggle of a family business and it's choices of how to remain successful and carry on. This is the coming of age story of Gretchen who must make big decisions in her life about what she really wants to do both in her personal and professional life. She has to find her way and embrace who she is. There is also a little thread of a love story woven in. The book is full of information about soy sauce. There is also elements of the Asian culture clash. The new ways vs. the old and problems of immigrants. Should she give up tradition and become more American or embrace her Asian culture? I found this book interesting. I give this book a 4 out 5.

Roxane says

There are beautiful moments throughout the novel, but on the whole, I wanted much more from the writing, from the storytelling.

Imi says

A quick, pleasant enough read, but not quite strong enough for me to rate 3 stars. Gretchen Lin, the protagonist, is unlikable in a spoilt rich (thirty-something) kid kind of a way. I found it hard to be truly invested in Gretchen's dilemma; whether to go back to America to a cheating husband and a grad school placement that she really doesn't care about, or to stay in Singapore and take on the family business that she doesn't really care about. Really, Gretchen, were they your only options? Having said that, I was much more invested in the rest of her family as characters. I began to feel that I would have much preferred if the novel was set a few decades earlier; the story of how the family business began, and the ups and downs of Gretchen's parents' relationship were intriguing. I also felt, despite not being the central characters, both Gretchen's mother and father were much more balanced and dimensional. Unfortunately, the story keeps drifting back to Gretchen's moaning, and to her romantic interests and friends, who by the end I could not help being frustrated with, even as Gretchen herself hadn't behaved particularly well. I'm really interested in

the premise of her sophomore novel, *Bury What We Cannot Take*, and hope to pick it up sometime, despite feeling that I'll have forgotten much of this first novel pretty soon.

Clarissa Simmens says

An excellent story containing all the rich symbolism I enjoy. Gretchen is a music student but the metronome appears so many times that surely it is a metaphor for her chaotic life: to slow down her mother's illness, to speed up time to get away from family and to reverse time back to when her marriage was whole. Chen's two sentences describe the major theme: "I reached over to my nightstand, turned my metronome to forty, the slowest setting, and counted the steady clicks. Once the needle got going, all you had to do was keep time." So true...so difficult to do...

Angela Schaffer says

This book was a disappointment overall. In both fiction and film, I most enjoy works in which I can connect strongly to the characters. I simply could not do that with this novel. The protagonist, Gretchen, is too weak, in her decisions about her marriage, her career, her parents, her new relationship, etc. I felt she was a poorly developed character. I also believed the text suffered from editing. There was a fine concept there. However, as a Creative Writing instructor, I would have handed this back to Chen and told her to work on "showing vs. telling." Her emotions are not properly portrayed. It felt like, "Yeah, I'm sad my mom is an alcoholic and it kind of sucks the guy I'm screwing doesn't really care about me" but I never really felt those emotions as a reader at all. Further, I think the business and the "heritage" line of soy sauce was the most compelling part of the plot, and that is just left hanging with nothing resolved with Cal, who has betrayed the trust of the company and his family. Chen failed to create an investment in this story for me.

jennifer says

I bought this book for cheap on Amazon, fairly suspicious that this would end up being "chick lit," and my suspicions really were fair.

Let's just say it would take very little work to turn this into a Lifetime movie. There's a little more depth than that, but it's slight enough to be edited out. Our main character's really kind of a spoiled bitch, with Parents Issues, but none of that is explored enough to be something to make you go "hmm." The soy sauce angle is thankfully relevant but slight. I craved Chinese food while and after reading, which got this review its second star.

I feel happy for the author that she wrote this book, and benevolent for being a "pre-buyer" on my Kindle, but this book makes me think I could write something and get it published -- so, there's that.

Bailey says

I actually really loved this, and I was surprised to see other reviews disparaging it in such a harsh way. It's a

novel about a woman at 30 who's getting divorced, and goes home to Singapore temporarily to see her family and get herself together. She has to put up with a lot of jerks, almost all of whom are men. This is most definitely not a love story, which I thought was a major plus. If anything, the strongest relationships are between Gretchen and her mother and with her best friend.

It's a sweet novel, and while at times I did want more from the writing, I don't think it was a bad book or that I regret reading it. If, like me, you've had this waiting in your ereader forever, give it a try.

(Updated 12/10 to reflect that I did really enjoy this book)

Jood Hooligan says

<http://www.platypire.com/j-hooligan/s...>

I picked this as one of my monthly choices as a Prime member last December, and I decided to finally give it a go when I saw it was a Whispersync option on KU. (Knowing that I can press play on a book I'm reading when I'm busy cleaning or driving is a fabulous thing, especially because I hate stopping a good book.)

Before I get into the review of the book, I want to say that I felt Nancy Wu did a wonderful job as a narrator, and I plan on listening to more of her work (seriously, I already have the other two of her works available on KU downloaded into my phone).

As someone who has been through divorce, similar to Gretchen's, in that there were no assets or children involved, so I could easily relate to how she was feeling. I do enjoy when I can form an emotional connection to a character. I remember the confusion and how much I struggled during those times.

My favorite part would have to be getting to experience the culture of the privileged of Singapore. I found it fascinating, and the setting was done so vividly that I could easily picture it as I read/listened.

I now have a deeper appreciation for soy sauce after reading this. I was never a big fan of it before, as it is too salty for my taste, but I'd like to experience the flavors talked about in this story. Especially with the Sprite.

The end, although I noticed it bothered many people, didn't upset me. I like open endings. It means I can reflect on the multiple possibilities.

Cathie says

I felt I was reading a journal, as if this was the author's memoir. So begins the story of Gretch who is in a transition in her life – after being faced with deceit and betrayal.

Many note the rich Asian symbolism. Funny on the rich asian part as, for example, I don't feel rich at all – it's our parents and ancestors legacy we just happen to be inheriting.

I can't help but reminisce on how the parents throw out the name of the Uni their son/daughter

attend/attending/attended. There's the typical "piano lessons and recitals", being Stateside or the expectation of the first born in line taking the helm of running the family business.

I loved the short dialogue where the taxi driver asks if she still spoke Chinese and she responded back in Chinese.

Interesting take from her arrival in Singapore to her decision to stay, or rather, move on. Entertaining read!
