

Unveiling The Magic of Food in

Samantha Vérant's

The Secret French Recipes of Sophie Valroux

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Abstract

This paper investigates the idea of food and what it brings to the table other than itself. From food comes all sorts of social skills. It shows how the protagonists prepare food and how it turns into magic and on bringing people together. The food brings personal, cultural, historical and social aspects of life. The food that is provided by the chateau in a small village called Champvert attracted many guests because of the magic it holds, solving the problems of the protagonist and the people surrounding her. It literally glues the irreparable, broken hearts. Food with its varieties and delicacies produces magical power in bringing the people together. The communal space it provides is so endearingly accepted and used preconsciously by Sophie Valroux. The objective of the study is to enrich the value of food and appreciate its indispensability in daily life. It also ensures how it brings people of all sorts together to enjoy and relish the food. Thus, it not only nourishes the body but also enhances the loving relationship and community sense among people.

Keywords: France, cuisine, magic, food, love, memory, tradition.

Introduction:

Like all other literatures of the world American literature contains wide and varied array of literary works which extends over styles, genres and historical periods. Almost all the works produced by many

authors of America are influenced by English literature during its early periods where American literature was in its verge of birth. Samantha Vérant is an American who has keen interest in French culture and its cuisine. She has many passions and is also a home French chef, and wine connoisseur. Currently living in South West France she has experience in working as a chef observing the chef's lifestyle. French culture which is distinguished by its worldliness, creativity and appreciation of arts makes it the major cultural influence in and around Europe and all over the world. French food and culture are linked with culinary traditions that weaves a path into the soul of the nation. French cuisine is not just a compilation of recipes but it is a reflection of the French way of life. The cultural practices are handed down through generations conserving the essence of each terroir. Each region of France has its own specialties and cultural heritage from day-to-day bread to grand extensive dishes. They enjoy and prefer food that is fresh and seasonal. They do not rush while eating instead they cook meals with such caution and love and savour each bite meticulously knowing its purpose and what it does to the body. And so does the protagonist Sophie through her experience in culinary world, enlightens the emotional journey of love and awakening.

Magic in food and how it brings people together:

Food is central to all living beings, it is not only used for survival purposes but it also serves as a forum to build social structure by engaging and sharing food. There are films which portray the magical food, potions and wine that helps them foresee the future or relieve them from spiritual and emotional imbalance. For example the Elven Lembas in "The Chronicles of Narnia" and the wine that provide them with visions in "Lionheart". This happens only in a fantasy world but the real magic of food happens when the cook gives their whole heart and soul to it, beginning from the source of the ingredients to the hands that are involved or from the experiences they have gained. All these counts to create magic in food which imbibes the magical power to bring people together. Whenever some women or men cook certain dishes they are reminded of their grandmother's cooking, or they may retrieve back to childhood to live in the past for few minutes which gives joy to the maker while cooking and to the mindful eater while eating.

Sophie Valroux is an aspiring young chef who had her career fall deep into the gutter just few months back in America. She feels utterly devastated because becoming a Michelin star chef was her dream. But after hearing that her grandmother is under medical treatment she immediately books a one way ticket to France. On arriving to Champvert, France she comes to know that she is going to inherit the chateau and a restaurant her grandmother owns. Due to her bad experience in America she is terrified of her talents and creativity. But slowly she comes out of her shell and devises her own menu with her grandmother's diary guidance.

Samantha Vérant's other novels are *The Spice Master at Bistro Exotique*, *Sophie Valroux's Paris Stars* and the two memoirs *How to make a French Family: A Memoir of Love, Food and Faux Pas* and *Seven Letters from Paris: A Memoir*. All these books are related to French food and culture. The novel *The Secret*

French Recipes of Sophie Valroux delves into nostalgia, recovering and self-discovery. Gradually she recovers herself from the deep sorrow and self-doubts. Realising her responsibility and the need of the hour she decides to take up the challenge to run the chateau in the place of her grandmother. Through her culinary mastery and excellence, every dish that she prepares turns into a gateway of treasured memories and unexpressed emotions. The author intricately blends the magic of love with the themes of restoration, love and loss. This creative narration excites her senses and warms her heart. Sophie loves cooking and every dish is made with love by the team and she also encourages her team to do with the same. And so she says: **“For every meal, we’re cooking from the heart. I want to feel love, taste it, and experience it in every dish. Are you with me? Love,” I said. “That’s our story.”(p.262)**

Being a grand chef in chateau she channels her love for cooking with personal sentiment and familial tradition creating delicious dishes. Each menu that she produces is eccentric as she prepares entirely with the fresh supplies of products she gets hands on. She uses her presence of mind and common sense and comes out with innovative creative ideas to prepare varied variety of dishes using the abundant garden fresh herbs and vegetables. With her immense knowledge and wide experience in cooking inherited from her grandmother she uses edible, fragrant, colourful flowers wisely to decorate her presentation of food attractive, thereby making her guests flabbergasted. Everyone working in the chateau and the guests marvel and admire her talents and refinement of her culinary style. Unlike the traditional way of cooking, whenever she sees new fruits or fresh flowers she is inspired by them and always finds a different way of using them retaining its purest flavour and taste simultaneously. In her schedule there is no definite menu for each day. According to the goods that she receives everyday, she with her innovative ideas in cooking tries to prepare varieties of dishes which provides her ample opportunities to play with the ingredients and her creativity. Through her delectable culinary creations she connects with her patrons in the chateau, through which she embraces her own past. Her inborn natural love for humanity, food and cooking are brought out through her following words. She constantly reminds herself and the others that every dish is out of love. **“Food had always been my way of showing love.” (p.119)**

Food is used as a metaphor and is artfully delivered by Samantha Vérant for sustenance, depicting the healing of shattered relationship and mending the broken heart by cooking and sharing meals. Sumptuous and delicious food always make people happy and content. In Champvert, the people conduct a family lunch party on Sundays, where everyone in the village come bearing all the products that they make or grow in their land like vegetables, eggs, fish, meat, cheese, bread, ducks and a lot more to share and feast with. “Food brings people together on many different levels. It’s nourishment of the soul and body; it’s truly love.” (Edmunds). They spend the whole day cooking and enjoying each other’s company as a community. Children play in the garden joyfully, men play pentaque and women cook in the kitchen with joy and love bringing out the luscious aroma to fill their soul and belly.

On Sundays, we'd have family lunches, inviting practically everybody from the tiny village of fifty or so people. The day started at ten in the morning, not ending until dusk, when the bats and barn swallows swooped in the sky and the moon and stars began to twinkle. Villagers arrived early in the morning with whatever they had—eggs, fresh fruits and vegetables from their gardens, ducks, chickens, rabbits, and homemade sausages. (p.89)

Through Sophie's culinary experience Vérant allures readers to begin on a journey which involves all the senses with the help of aroma and taste of bread straight out of the oven which gives solace and a sense of belonging. Sophie has a diary passed down to her by the grandmother Odette which has been preserved for twenty years that contains the traditional recipes. Her grandmother's traditional recipes and experiences are to be taken only as guidelines, but when creativity involves it makes one a great chef. It is a pathway to the past, protecting the memories of her childhood and traditions which goes beyond the time. By gaining the secret and cherished diary which not only provides the ingredients to the marvellous dishes but also uncovers her own identity. By using food as a language, Vérant proves the mutational power of love and the meals that are shared help to have deep and essential connections.

Sophie after all the inner chaos accepts the grand chef post making her grandmother retire. Her meals have the magical ability to transform people to other dimensions. Her dearest grandmother is so satisfied and impressed with Sophie's skills in cooking, she feels proud that she can cook like her or even in this situation surpassed her. **"Ma chérie, your skills in the kitchen have far surpassed mine. I felt your heart in every dish. I felt your soul. I'd say good luck for tonight, but you won't need it. All my love, ta grandmère."**(p.266) Her exquisite dishes brought many elite guests from France even from United States to the chateau, she became famous within short span gaining the attention of media and her status rose higher than she could ever believe. She has always wanted to create something extraordinary and to make use of her wild imagination as she says:

I had to create something special, something out of this world, on my own terms. I wanted to get creative and do something colorful, playing with the colors of winter and whatever was in season. My imagination raced with all of the possibilities—a slideshow in my mind presenting delicious temptations.(p.135)

The guests enjoy and relish each dish in the menu and some even turned to regulars. The dishes she makes are garden fresh, the wine is made in there, seasonal fruits and meats used wisely through her creativity. Sophie with her friend and co-worker Phillipa ends up creating a beautiful piece of art on a plate, as she wonders at her creation saying:

**Admittedly, the plate was a piece of art,
so beautiful Monet and his water lilies would have been jealous—
just as wonderful and colorful as I'd imagined it would be. (p.145)**

She is so thankful for the space her grandmother provided for creating new idea, new recipes and mix matching flavours which was restricted when she was working in America. Her grandmother loved cooking and treated every guest with love and this thought is shared by the worker Clothilde to Sophie. **“To her, every guest becomes a member of the family when they stay under her roof,” said Clothilde.”(p.93)** The guests are treated like family and are free to explore and relish the dishes provided and the natural beauty, the lake, the garden, wine tasting which the chateau offers. As a result every guest experiences a magical power staying in the chateau. They eagerly come to appreciate the food, the nature, the abundance of beauty that the chateau proffers. Everybody experiences the flavours dancing in their tongue and love in every bite, they could not forget the feeling if they even tried to. Everyone in the chateau applauds for the piece of art and also can feel the love and it helps them transport, and is awed. This clears her self-doubt in creating dishes.

“Not impossible,” said Walter. “Just take a look around. Watch everyone’s expressions. Your cooking is so magical, I think a few people have been transported to another dimension.” I surveyed the party. A few guests were closing their eyes, heads tilted back as they ate, supreme pleasure on their faces. I wanted to jump into their minds to see what they were thinking. I wondered if, when they ate oysters, they thought of their childhoods by the sea. Or, when they ate the spiced lobster, if it brought memories of pain or love. (p.166)

The magic in her hands does magic in the minds of the guests which brings them back over again. It brings people together to enjoy weekly gatherings as a community and also from all over France to the Champvert village, whether it can be distant memory of childhood, or to relive the time they once had with their loved ones, or to repay someone through food or remind them of the warmth of their home.

The sound of applause thundered in my ears. I brought my hands to my wildly beating heart, not knowing what to say. I closed my eyes, thinking of my grand-mère. “My grand-mère taught me that meals are supposed to be cooked with love, each ingredient celebrating this exquisite emotion. Tonight, we are celebrating love, are we not? And it’s my greatest hope you’ll love what we’ve prepared for you. *Toujours l’amour. Encore l’amour,*” I said. “*Merci.*” Forks and spoons clanged on glasses.(p.238)

She uses her grandmother as a guiding light to find her own identity and make her own recipes by exploring every ingredient available in the chateau. She receives lot of praise for her works and she feels happy and grateful for it. She experiences different emotions each day especially love from the guests,

which just reciprocates each and every time. They, moreover share love and encourage each other, Sophie by preparing dishes and guests devouring it. The love in the kitchen travels long way to reuniting or compromising with people she had feud with. She got a chance to reunite with her father in one of their Christmas celebrations, whom she has never known till this time. They bond over chateau and they work around it.

Through her culinary creativity, she creates emotional connection between people through its healing properties. People come together as a community to celebrate food. The magic of food is its ability to delight, nourish, connect, comfort, inspire and heal.

Conclusion:

The novel honours the magic of food and constantly reminds its power to cut across the time and obstacle that connect with soul. Altogether it blends the everchanging vigour of family, place and undoubtedly food. It not only supplies the recipes and the varied flavoured French cuisine but also provides with the affluent human experience with a hint of nostalgia and a dash of hope. “Food, in the end, in our own tradition, is something holy. It’s not about nutrients and calories. It’s about sharing. It’s about honesty. It’s about identity.” (COK)

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