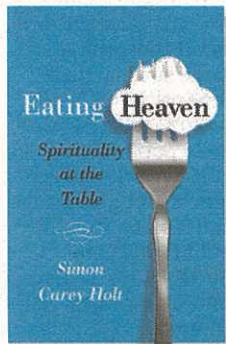


Books

Xmas gift ideas: for the foodie

Kara Martin reviews *Eating Heaven: Spirituality at the Table* by Simon Carey Holt.



I have seen Simon select ingredients from market stalls and home-grown herbs. I have seen him prepare food with focus and joy. I have watched him set the table, lighting a candle representing

the presence of God. I have held hands around the table to thank God for his provision. I have enjoyed wonderful combinations of scents and tastes, and thoughtful conversation.

I have seen him practising everything he writes about in *Eating Heaven*.

This book protests against “fast food, microwave ovens and fragmented schedules” and an empty dining room table. But the table beckons because “at its core, the table is about such fundamentally human things as intimacy and family, identity and communication, redemption and friendship, sustenance and celebration, beginnings and endings.” Is your mouth watering yet?

In this delightful book, Holt combines stories, research, biblical references and themed recipes. He deals with all the



Author and minister, Simon Carey Holt

different “tables” in our lives, and points out what is extraordinary about the everyday activity of eating.

In “The Kitchen Table”, Holt describes growing up with his family, and the significance of meals as a place of formation. He talks about his own discipline of eating as a family in spite of difficult work and social schedules, and

concludes with his mother’s chocolate pudding recipe. Then he moves to “The Backyard Table” where he suggests that the BBQ, or the more modern woodfire pizza oven, might be an antidote to an “ever more paranoid age of cultural suspicion and border protection”.

My favourite chapter is the next: “The Café Table”, since it is a table I frequent! Holt says it beautifully: “the café is about more than flat whites ... Coffee is about relationship, connection, theatre and community.”

Just when you think Holt has got carried away with the wonder of food, he also challenges our cultural obsession in “The Five-star Table”: “The truth is, where we eat, what we eat, and with whom is an indication of our social standing and the ever-clearer divisions in our society.” He quotes J. Shannon Jung who recommends that we never lose sight of food whose source is God, and its purpose as sharing, given for relationship, and the table is “an expression of community”. Holt adds a desire for the table to be a place of justice and inclusion.

In “The Work Table”, Holt talks about cooking as vocation—he trained as a pastry chef—and this flows into the mood of “The Festive Table” where Holt shares moving stories of weddings and funerals: “... it is difficult to imagine any major or minor alliance, rite of passage or celebration, not marked by the sharing of food and drink.” For Holt,

such feasts are nothing less than “our communal defiance of death and our claiming of life”. And “The Multicultural Table” is a celebration of Australia as the world’s most cosmopolitan society where “food, identity and story” are intimately entwined.

The last table Holt invites us to is “The Communion Table” where he talks about the origin of the communion feast, and Jesus’ radical reinterpretation of the Passover meal. He quotes New Testament scholar Robert Karris’ claim: “Jesus got himself crucified by the way that he ate.” At a time when the table represented social order and religious purity, Jesus broke every rule in society and culture, claiming that God’s table is open to all. In a memorable phrase, Holt describes the table of Jesus as “one that compels, obligates and sends”.

In concluding, Holt skilfully weaves together the lessons learnt at these tables, and concludes that given a choice we would not choose to live without the table: “For life without the table is no life at all”.

This is a beautiful book, one to be savoured and shared. In our food-obsessed culture it might be the perfect Christmas gift to get people to pause as they plate up, and consider how life at the table could move beyond food to relationships, and beyond exclusion to grace.

Kara Martin is Associate Dean of the Marketplace Institute at Ridley.

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