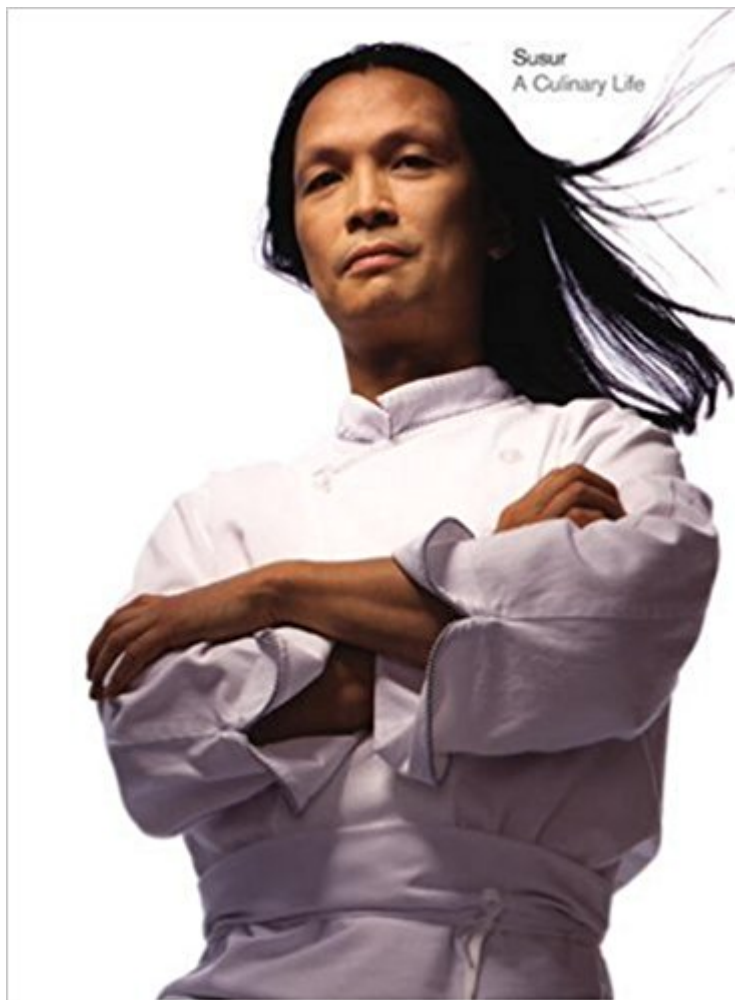


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Susur: A Culinary Life



Synopsis

Sensuous, inspiring, and wholly original, SUSUR: A CULINARY LIFE celebrates one of the most compelling chefs of our time. Susur Lee has built an international reputation with his bold interpretation of classical Chinese cooking, dubbed nouvelle chinoise. SUSUR: A CULINARY LIFE is an intimate look at this culinary master, in two lavishly illustrated volumes that are joined at the spine and designed to be read in tandem. Book 1 recounts Susur's life story, a circuitous journey that has taken him from Hong Kong to France to Toronto. Book 2 features a sumptuous array of more than 120 of Susur's most sought-after recipes. Together, the two books create a bold yet nuanced work that is as innovative as the chef himself.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Critics are falling all over themselves to come up with new superlatives to describe the intense flavors and unique combinations turning up on his plate night after night. -Gourmet "Martial arts cooking from a kung fu master-that's the only way to describe Susur's cuisine."-Jean-Georges Vongerichten "Filled with inspiring ideas as well as gorgeous food, Susur: A Culinary Life reveals the heart of a great chef's creative journey."-Nancy Oakes, Boulevard "Susur's food combines elements of art, science, and music. This book is poetic, truly something bursting from his formidable soul."-Charlie Trotter "I admire Susur's passion in creating delicacies that are a feast for both the eyes and the palate."-Drew Nieporent "Toronto's most adventurous chef."-Saveur

A comprehensive two-volume book about Toronto's most innovative chef, Susur Lee, including a detailed biography and more than 90 recipes. Gorgeous, unique packaging includes two books sewn at the spine, with magnets bound into the covers to unite the individual volumes. Susur's signature dishes include Five-Spice Foie Gras with Roast Suckling Pig and Onion Pancake; and Kungpao-Spiced Scallops with Haricots Verts & Hijiki Salad and Prosciutto Chiffonade.

Beautiful books about a fascinating man. Great recipes. I believe the recipes are accessible & can be managed by an experienced home cook.

'Susur A Culinary Life' by Hong Kong / Toronto Chef Susur Lee and a number of co-authors may be the apotheosis of the attractively pretentious tabletop culinary book. It is at least as attractive as Nobuyuki Matsuhisa's latest book and even has a few things of value over 'Nobu Now'. Its first pretension is the fact that it is bound as two books, joined at the spine, as if it were two Siamese twins. Since it is impossible to separate the two books without ruining the value of this \$50 list volume, and yet you simply cannot use the recipes in the second half without the pantry recipes in the first, this dual binding is purely for show, contributing to little except the cost of the book and the inconvenience of using the two parts of the book together. Not only that, the index for both 'volumes' is in the second half, so the first half loses much of its value with its index detached. Reading this book has strong similarities to watching the Food Network show, 'Iron Chef America'. Unless you happened to be a chef with major pretensions to serious 'haute cuisine', you would simply never want to reproduce the recipes you see being conjured up by these very seriously talented and experienced chefs. Why in the world would you ever, for example, want to obtain a compressed air pump to assist in making Peking duck within an hour or screw a piece of fatback to a cedar plank to infuse it with the cedar taste? Susur Lee even presents the same persona as 'Iron Chef' star Masaharu Morimoto, although I suspect Susur Lee is one or two cuts above Morimoto in overall culinary creativity. The first of the two volume halves is made up of five essays written about Susur Lee in the third person by Jacob Richler, with credit for 'creation' given to Sara Angel and to photography by Shun Sasabuchi and Edward Pond. I sense these essays lose a lot in being written in the third person. Even though Michael Ruhlman has done a lot of the writing for Eric Ripert ('A Return to Cooking') and Thomas Keller ('Bouchon', 'The French Laundry Cookbook'), but in neither of these books do we feel removed from the real source of culinary inspiration springing from the imagination and thoughts of Ripert and Keller. The five essays are

largely chronological, but they start with 'Elements of Taste 2000-2005', followed by 'Hong Kong: French Lessons 1974-1980', 'Local Hero: Lotus 1980-1997', and 'Singapore: Five Thousand Years of Eating 1997-2000', only to return to the present with 'The Susur Pantry 2000-2005'. By far the most important chapter in the first volume is the last, 'Basic Recipes and Glossary'. The Glossary is fair and probably worthless if you have the 'Larousse Gastronomique' or any other good culinary encyclopedia. The 'basic recipes' are essential to understanding Susur Lee's recipes in the second half of the book, as they are specifically cited as ingredients to almost every recipe. The second half of the book consists exclusively of 57 recipes for entrees. There is NO table of contents for these recipes and they appear in no logical order I can fathom regarding course or ingredient. Most are somewhere between the size of an appetizer and the size of a conventional main course. As I said above, virtually all the recipes are impractical for one or more reasons. These are:

1. The recipes use ingredients that are difficult to obtain in many parts of the country such as fresh abalone, skate wing, and periwinkles.
2. The recipes use ingredients that are expensive such as truffles, foie gras, and fresh porcini mushrooms.
3. The recipes use an inordinately large number of ingredients, such as recipe 2.11, which uses 56 individual ingredients in six sub-recipes, with four of those sub-recipes using four other recipe preparations from Book 1.

4. The recipes call for some techniques which are probably beyond the patience of anyone but a professional, such as 'frying' a squab by pouring very hot oil over the skin while holding the carcass over a bowl of hot oil for six or more minutes. And that was for just one serving! I could hardly believe it when Morimoto did that on 'Iron Chef America' for 10 minutes, but that was for four servings from a single bird! It is important to say that there are things of value to be found in this book, if you are a really serious foodie or a culinary professional. First, the photography of the finished dishes is exceptionally good, and, there is a photograph for every dish, and, the photograph appears alongside the recipe in almost every case. The exceptions are few enough not to be annoying. Second, the modularity of the recipes has much to teach the serious professional chef. This technique amounts to a graduate course in the ideas put out by Ming Tsai in his book, 'Simply Ming', although Ming Tsai's presentation is much more friendly to the home cook. Third are the very same techniques I cite as being impractical for the home chef. While these may not be appropriate to the routine kitchen, they are a source of ideas to the ambitious chef who wants to know what the most adventuresome professionals are doing. I am really hard pressed to decide between three and four stars. This is even more inaccessible than Nobu's books to which I gave four stars, yet it has some things which may actually be more interesting and valuable to the professional. So, I give it four stars with a stern warning to the casual cookbook buyer that this is really a rather expensive investment written primarily for professionals

and dedicated amateurs. But, if what you want is a conversation piece cookbook, this will fit that purpose pretty well. Recommended to professionals.

This book is not for your average home cook, if you believe that you have a little more than a bit of flare in the kitchen, this is one man that can put flavour's together, for the budding chefs there are some flavour's that can be explored

Given the acidity of previous reviews, let me start with some background on myself: I am an American not resident in Canada; I am a non-professional chef -- I cook for myself, my family and my friends. I love food, both from the philosophy that one can learn the history of a country or region by learning about its cuisine and from the perspective that I truly believe we are what we eat ... and the miserable record of American health and longevity is directly due to the poor quality of what we consume. I first saw Susur on Food Network's "Chef du Jour", where well-regarded chefs would do a single 30 minute program on a topic of their choice. That was at least 8 years ago. I think he may have been on one or two "Ready, Set, Cook" programs, but I'm not certain. He certainly didn't push to become a "celebrity chef", at least in the TV sense. He did become a celebrity in the culinary world: becoming one of Food & Wine's "10 Best Chefs in the World" is not a self-serving proclamation -- it is an evaluation by those who can and do taste the food of all the best and near-best. I've had the good fortune to have an expense account and a business that required me to take clients to dinner, so I've had the privilege of eating at many of the finest restaurants in North America, Europe, Japan, and Australia. My personal opinion is that Susur belongs among the finest and if in Toronto, it would be my first choice of a dining location -- yes, even if I were paying the bill myself -- some meals are worth every penny of the cost. I've eaten at his restaurant in Toronto many times, on business trips. The food has always been spectacular, along with the service, along with the description of the philosophy behind each dish. A meal at Susur's not only satisfies the body; it's an education in itself. Again, this is not simply my opinion -- read the reviews in Toronto's newspapers, or read the reviews and look at the scores in zagat.com. Susur isn't the only "great chef" in Toronto, but he is clearly in that category. Finally, to the book itself: Yes, the binding is unusual), as is the organization (would I count it as 2 books -- no -- do I think that volume 1 as a biography and volume 2 as recipes are two very different works -- absolutely yes). Most chefs don't provide a personal biography and discuss the evolution of their philosophy of cuisine. If you want lots of recipes you can make with ingredients found anywhere, there are thousands of such cookbooks to choose from (start with Rachel Ray's "30 Minute Meals" and go from there). On the

other hand, if you want to learn about how to layer flavors, and see how a master puts together a pantry, this is the book to read. The same advice (for flavor, you need sauces, pastes, and other preps) is given by most chefs in cooking courses and is found in lots of other cookbooks -- just to mention a few in Chinese, try Barbara Tropp's "China Moon Cookbook", Nina Simonda "Spoonful of Ginger", Eileen Yin-Fei Lo's "From the Earth" or Emily Grace's "Breath of a Wok". Susur's are more complex, and more subtle, but taste the food and you'll see how it transcends anyone else's. Is this a book I will cook from daily? No, and Susur is the first to admit that his cuisine needs a tremendous amount of manpower to achieve. Will this book teach me to be a better chef? Absolutely. Will it have a place of honor in my kitchen? Assuredly. Study it, think about it, and learn from it ... and if you have the opportunity, go to Toronto ... and taste it.

The two books bound together as one is perhaps pretentious, but it serves to separate the ideas and philosophies from the recipes. They both give a unique view into what makes one of the most inventive chefs alive, tick. The recipes are complex and may not be recreated by many readers, but the ideas within them including many novel flavor combinations will likely be a source of inspiration to any keen amateur chef who reads this book. I'll agree with other reviewers that this book is indeed pretentious. But so is having an old copy of Larousse Gastronomique, or just about every 'top restaurant' book out there. Shame on anyone in Toronto who hasn't made the trip to Susur's restaurant, it isn't insanely expensive, and I managed to get in mid week without having booked. Very few people will ever be able/willing to make any of the recipes in this book for themselves, but all should be able to gain some inspiration from the ideas and flavor combinations presented in these pages.

One of the better culinary books I have read. Susur's recipes might be for everybody. The design of the book is beautiful. Not just your simple 'cookbook' - it is informative, gives a great perspective on Susur's path to fame and is very user-friendly.

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