



Seasons Eatings

By Michael Nagrant

YOU CAN'T END THE CYCLE CAN YOU? Your great grandfather took your grandfather who took your father who took you to the Walnut Room at Marshall Field's. Doped up on Frango mints, your chin dribbled with white veloute from the flaky pot pie, as you gazed skyward at the tallest Christmas tree you'd ever seen. The restaurant chandeliers were refracting crystal kaleidoscopes for the glinting golden strings of Christmas lights.

Of course, what you don't remember is the two-hour wait for a table, your sweaty feet jailed in horrid moon boots, hundreds of your juvenile compatriots in the ADHD mafia testing the fortitude of their wilting parents. And once you got a table, you competed for the affection of your server with 450 others, only to score slightly above average though uninspired plates of food. Of course, back then you were only interested in tipping over that endless glass of cherry Coke and picking over your chicken fingers.

Lest you think I'm being Scroogey, I get it. I really do. I shed tears over what I thought was my last stein of Berghoff dark and pink slices of steamed corned beef a couple years ago. Heck, I got suckered into buying a portrait of Bertha Palmer from the Berghoff auction. I love Chicago tradition. In fact I'm getting goose-bumpy just thinking about the dark wainscoted lobby of the Walnut Room, the gold-trimmed elevators and the magnificent alabaster columns on the perfume and cosmetics level. But I also know I can get my low traffic, line-free fix anytime after December.

Even if you make the Walnut visit, you will inevitably find yourself sweaty, tired and cranky carting armloads of shopping bags down State Street and Michigan Avenue again at some point during the holiday season. Skip the siren call of Jimmy Johns, McDonald's or Bennigan's. Don't let "Black Friday" become an apt descriptor for your eating fortunes as well as your failure to snatch that free DVD player or inkjet printer at 5am at Radio Shack. Instead, check out this downtown shoppers holiday guide to good eats.

State Street

Frontera Fresco, Seventh Floor, Macy's 111 North State

You don't have to give up Macy's altogether. Scoot in for all-natural chicken huaraches and chorizo quesadillas from Rick Bayless, and sneak a peak at the big tree in the nearby Walnut Room line-free.

Pizanos, 61 East Madison, (312)236-1777

Rudy Malnati Jr. might live in the pizza shadow of his brother Lou, but anyone with half a palate knows Rudy makes the better deep-dish pie. The flaky buttery crust and judicious use of ingredients here ensures your holiday shopping won't end with a debilitating gut bomb.

Pastoral, 53 East Lake, (312)658-1250

Their Canard Balsamico featuring duck confit, balsamic-glazed cipollini onions, greens, dijon mustard and fromager d'affinois cheese on Bennison's bakery bread may be the best sandwich in the loop.

Spa Café, 112 West Monroe, (312)551-0000

Owner Patrick Cassata is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America. Chomp down on "Quesanini," a Panini-pressed whole-wheat tortilla filled with savory goods like chicken, brie, grilled leeks, mango and cilantro, or try the kicked-up fresh made soups like roast cauliflower with a tangy infusion of blue cheese—so velvety smooth that it would be at home in any of Chicago's best restaurants.

Atwood Café, 1 West Washington, (312)368-1900

Atwood's dark woods, lush drapes and smooth suede seats will comfort shopping aches as you chow down on Chef Heather Terhune's tasty farm-inspired fare. The Moroccan-spiced lamb burger with orange-beet-olive relish, cabbage-slaw will fuel you for the rest of the afternoon.

Michigan Avenue

Viand, 155 East Ontario, (312)255-8505

Featuring in-house-baked airy foccacia and chewy pretzel bread with a side of Dijon mustard butter, Viand might have the best bread basket in town. Even though it's on the dinner menu, demand the four-cheese ravioli with white truffle sauce and red wine for lunch. It's like a cheese-and-jelly sandwich with black truffles, but in a good way.

CND Gyros, 205 East Grand, (312)467-4195

Sure it looks like a sketchy bar in the shadow of the Michigan Avenue pedestrian bridge, but so is the original Billy Goat Tavern. Gyro melts the thing.

Wow Bao, 835 North Michigan

Wow Bao is basically a glorified mall food court stand, but in the tasty spirit of Beijing street food. The airy steamed sweet dough dumplings filled with BBQ pork, chicken teriyaki, spicy Mongolian beef here are also the perfect portable power boost if it's December 24 and you still haven't finished your Christmas shopping.

Sayat Nova, 157 East Ohio, (312)644-9159

Slink down in the white grotto booths and chill like a Middle Eastern Hugh Hefner while you chow down yalanca sarma (grape leaves stuffed with rice, chick peas, pine nuts, onions and tomatoes) and spit-roasted lamb kofta meatballs with hot yogurt mint soup.



On the cover

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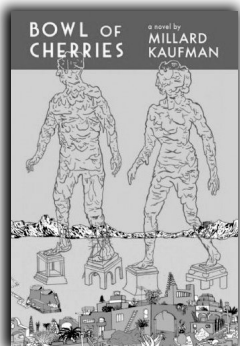
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We Come Bearing Books

By John Freeman

FORGET ABOUT SILKSCREEN T-SHIRTS, MIXTAPES OR EVEN THE SHARPER IMAGE CATALOG OF WONDERS, THERE'S NOTHING AS PERSONAL AS A BOOK. For every personality, every reading level, there's a book out there waiting to provide that lucky Christmas or Chanukah or Kwanzaa celebrant with a few hours—maybe a few weeks—of pleasure. To

help you unlock that potential for joy, here are a few holiday-time tips for the best books to buy this holiday season.

For your hot granny...

No one loves a late bloomer quite like a sassy older lady, so indulge her naughty sweet tooth with "Bowl of Cherries" (McSweeney's), 90-year-old Millard Kaufman's hilarious (and ribald) debut novel about a young man who bumbles from one misadventure to another before landing in a prison cell in Iraq.

For your Colbert-watching, Truthdig.com-reading, Nation-subscribing, anger-fatigued friend who believes there's nothing left to learn about this craven world...

It all makes sense—Katrina, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, the Israeli wall, Halliburton—in Klein's authoritative polemic, "The Shock Doctrine" (Metropolitan), which explores the relationship between shock therapy (either economic or military) and the spread of free-market ideals. Package with "Blackwater" (Nation Books), by Jeremy Scahill and stand back while your friend's head explodes.

For your friend, the smart-ass...

No one gave lip as wittily and as well as Ogden Nash. Even today's hipsters could learn a thing or two from him in "The Best of Ogden Nash" (Ivan R. Dee), a gigantic compendium of the late New Yorker writer's best light verse.

To the poetic, cumulus-headed soul in your life...

Michael O'Brien might just be the best kept secret of the poetry world. "Sleeping and Waking" (Flood Editions) is about to change that—these spare poems about love, life in a city and the in-between states of our lives drape as delicately as Japanese wall-hangings.

For dad, who bunkers down with one big biography...

Outside of Robert Caro's life of LBJ, John Richardson's ongoing study of Picasso is probably the most ambitious and magnificent biographical project in the world. His latest volume, "Picasso: The Triumphant Years, 1917-1932" (Knopf), follows the sacred master/monster out of World War I and up to the summits of fame.

For your nature-loving friend...

Eliot Weinberger's metaphysical essay collection "An Elemental Thing" (New Directions) provides a stirring glimpse into the way society's around the world live in tune with the seasons, while Rebecca Solnit's collection, "Storming the Gates of Paradise" (University of California), explores the politics of place with a stylish remove reminiscent of early Joan Didion.

To the dedicated fictionista in your circle...

Dinaw Mengestu's heartbreaking, exquisitely made "The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears" (Riverhead) tells the story of three African refugees making their way in Washington, D.C. long after they've given up on realizing their wildest American dreams.

For your favorite bookie, thug or all-around tough guy...with a brain...

Demonstrate your respect for his Machiavellian mind with "Sacred Games" (HarperCollins), Vikram Chandra's wonderful thriller about a Sikh police inspector pursuing an overload in and around Mumbai (now Bombay), when gangsters got so powerful they took over part of Bollywood and began scripting their own mythology.

For your friend, the atheist...

Even the firmest nonbeliever will get a chuckle out of A.J. Jacobs' quirky chronicle, "The Year of Living Biblically" (Simon & Schuster), his tale of living the Bible as literally as possible.

For your friend, the (enlightened) bible-thumper...

Write a sweet card, praising his or her open-mindedness, and enclose a copy of Christopher Hitchens' razor-sharp "God is Not Great" (Twelve).

For the journaler in your life...

Stare straight down into the powerful filament of Joyce Carol Oates' working mind with "The Journals of Joyce Carol Oates, 1972-1981" (Ecco), a period when she published an astonishing twenty-nine works of fiction, criticism and poetry.

For your lover...

There is a rightness and terrible melancholy to every sentence of Hisham Matar's debut novel, "The Country of Men" (Dial Press), which tells the story of a young boy who is entrusted with a secret much larger than him.

READINGS

SAT/24

Julia Wertz

The author discusses "The Fart Party Collection." *Quimby's*, 1854 W. North, (773)342-0910. 8pm. Free.

SUN/25

LaShonda Katrice Barnett

The author discusses "I Got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters on Their Craft." *Women and Children First Bookstore*, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 4:30pm. Free.

WED/28

Elyne Chaplik-Aleskow

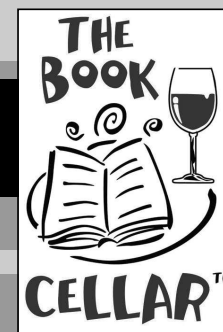
The author discusses "The Revolving Door." *Women and Children First Bookstore*, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. Free.

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