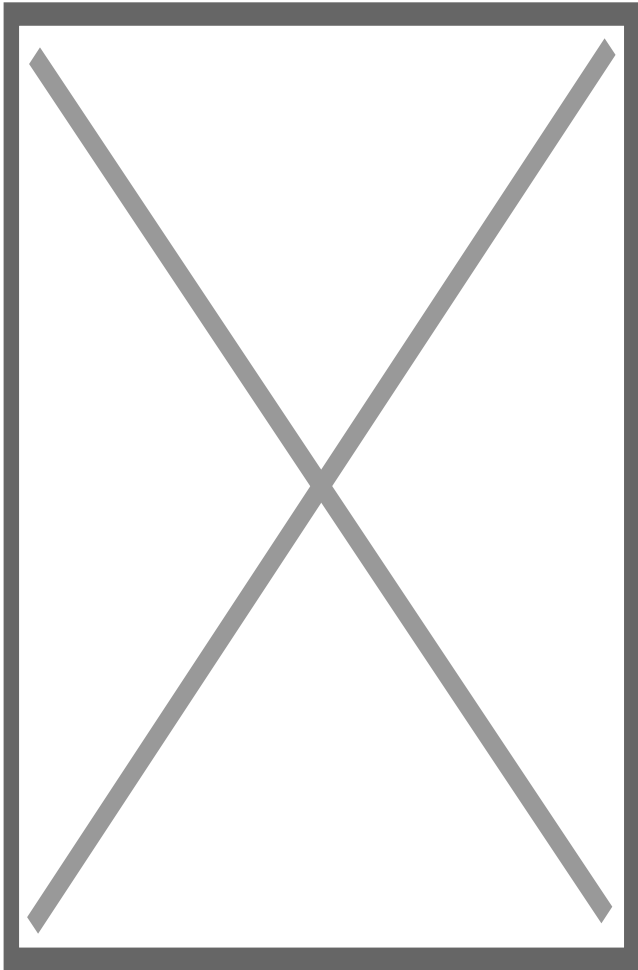


Lisa Donovan tells the stories behind the recipes

***Our Lady of Perpetual Hunger* exposes the misogyny within the restaurant industry.**

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [July 14, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Our Lady of Perpetual Hunger

A Memoir

By Lisa Donovan

Penguin

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Cooking got me through a year of staying at home during the pandemic. As I recently baked a shoofly pie, adapting my grandmother Anna's recipe for the Pennsylvania German molasses treat, I felt a kinship with Lisa Donovan, a chef who has won acclaim especially for her desserts.

After proving herself in the expected French cuisine, Donovan found that what classic recipes taught her "in precision and technique, they lacked in story and real-life meaning." In search of this missing dimension, she adds, "my nose was firmly planted in every church cookbook, every ladies'-guild or school-fund-raising cookbook, every old stapled or spiral-bound book of cakes and pies and divinity candies that I could find."

As Donovan elevated those pies and cakes to the level of fine dining, she also pursued the stories and recipes of her own women ancestors. She recounts talking into the wee hours of the morning with her 91-year-old great-great-aunt Ruby, absorbing family tales and learning how to make dried-apple hand pies. The 150-year-old recipe includes cream and black pepper and as much cinnamon as was available, which together mimic the nutmeg and cloves that were hard for Appalachian farmers to find. "I understand now why it has always been a transcendent experience for me" to shape flour into dough, Donovan writes,

even in the muck and mire of industry toil. It is a muscle memory that goes well beyond my short life and one that connects me to a certain feeling that is distinctly my southernness, slow and intuitive and clearly something I was a fool to fight off.

Our Lady of Perpetual Hunger is more than just good food writing. It's an exposé on the exploitative nature of the restaurant and hospitality industries. It's an account of surviving rape and domestic violence as a college student. It's a love story that includes a humorous first meeting, rapturous trips to New Orleans, and a marriage based on supporting each other's dreams and vocations.

Donovan writes about being a young mother living paycheck to paycheck in the mid-2000s with her hourly wage and her artist husband's pay from a frame shop while they traded off doing child care. Serving cocktails and greasy snacks to college students as a 26-year-old, she had to squat over the toilet with a manual breast pump in one of the bar's bathroom stalls to relieve the pressure until her shift was over and she could feed her infant daughter at 4 a.m.

After such experiences, she is determined to run things differently when she's in charge. One example is the Buttermilk Road Sunday Suppers she hosted at various locations around Nashville, with the slogan "Bringing People Together, One Biscuit at a Time." Donovan was raised Catholic, and based on what she writes of her current beliefs she might be called spiritual but not religious. Her Sunday suppers could have been a case study in *How We Gather*, Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile's report about alternative forms of connection and community.

Even as these meals became popular, Donovan insisted that diners couldn't buy out all the tickets for their friends. They had to sit at communal tables with only a couple of people they already knew, for meals served family style. The supper she's most proud of featured her Mexican-Zuni grandmother's *carnitas con chile verde* for the first course.

As she reclaims that recipe, she delves into stories of pain from her mestiza mother's side of the family—stories not talked about for generations. She saves sugarcoating for her pastries as she brings these stories to light alongside stories of the abuse she has endured both personally and professionally. "What I know of being a woman is that the world is ready to take every last bit of you if you let it," she writes.

Donovan's blunt analysis made me think of Kate Manne's 2017 book *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Manne distinguishes between sexism and misogyny. Sexism is an ideology or theory that alleges differences between male and female beyond what is known, with women being inferior. Misogyny is any behavior that undermines, belittles, and punishes women to enforce the norms of patriarchy. It doesn't necessarily relegate women to certain roles—it can even recognize that in many cases a woman is more talented, capable, or accomplished than the average man—but it maintains that women must be subordinate to men.

Donovan writes about how many of the people who hold the strings in her profession are willing to “give me only enough room to apologize or give me enough of their supposed ‘power’ to build up the men around me.” When she talks about how misogyny instrumentalizes women, she even starts to sound theological. In an essay on this theme, which she expands on in the book, she names as “the root evil of why women cannot get ahead in our society” the reality that “some men will always feel like we are the best tools for them to get what they need out of any given situation.”

Alongside the struggles, she also lifts up solidarity and friendship with women—including a mentor chef who continued to encourage Donovan long after she left her restaurant. “I have grown up in kitchens with women and I am now a woman who cooks from that place, in my heart, for a living,” she writes.

I want to give people food that tastes of our past stories and of our present . . . I want that food to be respected and honored in our world from its true origins, not solely from a male chef who has figured out how to build an entire brand around what he learned from our hands.

Reading about cooking has taught me to use coarse salt generously. Donovan does this with her language. In her book, it adds to the unapologetic way she tells her stories of survival and arrival at a place of embracing herself.