BOOK CLUB KIT

Author J. Ryan Stradal put together suggestions for Midwestern party snacks, cocktails, wine pairings, and even playlists to help you throw a book club party worthy of Eva Thorvald—Enjoy!

“Kitchens of the Great Midwest is a unique and pleasurable reading experience.” —The Washington Post

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The greatest magic in this book isn’t its depiction of foodie culture, which itself is quite wonderful. The magic lies in the way the main character—an elusive celebrity chef of destination dining—is revealed. The book is a chronological series of vignettes, from an infancy in which her father feeds her pureed pork shoulder, to her 30s, when she is the celebrity chef hosting secret destination dinners at $5,000 a plate. Never, though, is she the main actor in the events. I’m still scratching my head about how J. Ryan Stradal pulled it off.

—NPR’s Best Books of 2015, recommended by Philipp Goedicke, limericist, Wait Wait . . . Don’t Tell Me!

. . . [A]n impressive feat of narrative jujitsu . . . a narrative that keeps readers turning the pages too fast to realize just how ingenious they are.” —The New York Times

“Kitchens of the Great Midwest is a unique and pleasurable reading experience”

—The Washington Post

“I’d wager you’ll be hearing that J. Ryan Stradal’s Kitchens of the Great Midwest is ‘delicious’ and that he has ‘cooked up’ a great story about food and foodies, a story that will leave you ‘satisfied, not hungry for more.’ I would try not to make such lame jokes here, but what can I say? This debut novel is as tempting as a piece of Key Lime pie, so perfect is its ratio of tart-to-sweet.”

—Amazon’s Best Book of August 2015, recommended by Sara Nelson, Amazon Editorial Director

The author’s gentle skewering of foodie snobs (from county fair doyennes to the vegan/gluten-free/soy-free police) is spot on, and the blend of humor, warmth, and longing that he uses to portray family relationships make the book insightful and endearing. Savor it page by page.” —Oprah.com

“A sweet and savory treat.” —People

“Warning: this will make you hungry. . . . You won’t be able to put it down. And it will up your kitchen game.”

—The Skimm

“Part foodie fantasy, part family drama and all heart . . .” —The Los Angeles Times

“Midwesterners never forget what things cost, and Kitchens of the Great Midwest is a terrific reminder of what can be wrested from suffering and struggle—not only success, but also considerable irony, a fair amount of wisdom and a decent meal.” —The Guardian (UK)

“This lovely, poignant, hilarious book is the best thing I have read this year. Everything about it is original and wonderful. . . . The writing is whipcrack smart and it’s both powerfully moving and brilliantly satirical, especially about kitchen snobbery. Read it, read it!” —The Daily Mail (UK)

“Stradal’s debut is charming, rife with hardy, self-deprecating humor, but in Kitchens of the Great Midwest this short story writer really proves his mettle as a novelist to look out for.” —Bustle

“It’s like that famous recipe for Chicken Marbella that combines prunes, green olives, capers and chicken—you wonder how everything is going to come together in the end, and it’s blessedly not as neat as you expect. The strength of Stradal’s characters is in their familiarity, due in part to his North Dakota upbringing. The dialogue is effortless, genuine and often amusing.” —Minneapolis Star Tribune
“Stradal is a confident first novelist, crafting characters who are singular, sometimes unlikable but always human. Foodies and those who love contemporary literature will devour this novel that is being compared to Elizabeth Strout’s Olive Kitteridge. A standout.” —Library Journal (Starred Review)

“A very special novel most readers will hate to see end.” —School Library Journal

“[Kitchens of the Great Midwest is] the first novel about the emergence and current state of foodie culture . . . Fundamentally, [it’s] about what happens when opposing personalities coexist: those who bake with real butter versus those who don’t, those who obsess over heirloom tomatoes alongside those who don’t even know what they are. It uses these categories as a way to look at one of the most confusing, liberating truths there is, which is that often the people we think we’re the least like are the ones we end up needing the most.” —BookForum

“A young girl navigates a tumultuous childhood to become one of the top chefs in the country in this delicious debut from Stradal . . . Food and family intertwine in this promising debut that features triumph, heartbreak, and even recipes.” —Kirkus Reviews

“In Kitchens of the Great Midwest, a charming, fast-moving round robin tale of food, sensuality and Midwestern culture, Mr. Stradal has delivered one extremely tasty, well-seasoned debut in what is sure to be a long and savory career.” —Janet Fitch, author White Oleander and Paint It Black

“Kitchens of the Great Midwest is a big-hearted, funny, and class-transcending pleasure. It’s also both a structural and empathetic tour de force, stepping across worlds in the American midwest, and demonstrating with an enviable tenderness and ingenuity the tug of war between our freedom to pursue our passions and our obligations to those we love.”

—Jim Shepard, author of Project X and National Book Award finalist Like You’d Understand, Anyway

“A Great American Novel in the fullest sense of the term. Everything you want a book to be.” —Ben Loory, author of Stories for Nighttime and Some for the Day

“Tender, funny, and moving, J. Ryan Stradal’s debut novel made me crave my mother’s magic cookie bars . . . and every good tomato I’ve ever had the privilege of eating. Kitchens of the Great Midwest manages to be at once sincere yet sharply observed, thoughtful yet swiftly paced, and the lives of its fallible, realistic, and complicated characters mattered to me deeply. It’s a fantastic book.”

—Edan Lepucki, bestselling author of California

“An impossible-to-put-down, one-of-a-kind novel. The prose is beautiful, the characters are unique and memorable, and the plot is surprising at every turn. I have never read a book quite like this—and neither, I’ll bet, have you. This stunning debut announces J. Ryan Stradal as a first-rate voice in American fiction. This is a wildly creative, stunningly original, and very moving novel. I can’t wait to see what Stradal does next.”

—Rob Roberge, author of The Cost of Living

“From the quite literally burning passions of a lonely eleven-year-old girl with an exceptional palate, to the ethical dilemmas behind a batch of Blue Ribbon Peanut Butter Bars, J. Ryan Stradal writes with a special kind of meticulous tenderness—missing nothing and accepting everything. A superbly gratifying debut.”

—Meg Howrey, author of The Crane’s Dance

“Kitchens of the Great Midwest is a funny and moving novel that skewers foodies and non-foodies with equal abandon and equal affection. Stradal’s story of a reclusive super-chef and the family and friends in her orbit will be an easy handsell to anyone who likes their food and their satire served up spicy. Call it “What’d You Eat, Bernadette?” —David Enyeart, Common Good Books, St Paul, MN
“This novel just grew and grew on me and I loved it. True midwest where people are nice and meals are often whitefish and sweet pepper jelly. But there is a turn when Eva breaks out and becomes this amazing chef and commands dinners at $5,000 a head. Not predictable, this novel will warm your heart and tempt your taste buds as well.” —Annie Philbrick, Bank Square Books, Mystic, CT

“Kitchens of the Great Midwest is a pitch perfect debut. J. Ryan Stradal has created an unforgettable cast of characters anchored by Eva Thorvald, food savant and one of the most compelling females I’ve encountered in a novel in quite some time. A fish out of water from a very early age, Eva forges her singular path, with friends, family and lovers appearing and disappearing at a dizzying pace. Eva and her cohorts cook with passion and sometimes alarming competitiveness, and the reader gets the benefit of many fine recipes, reflecting the idiosyncrasy of each cook, respectfully representing the many styles of food of the Midwest and honoring all kinds of people. Kitchens of the Great Midwest celebrates the abiding love of family and friends, straight from the kitchen.” —Cathy Langer, Tattered Cover, Denver, CO

“Kitchens Of the Great Midwest is the perfect blend of characters, plot, and food to satisfy everyone. It’s refreshing to have a “feel good” read for a change.” —Judy Wheeler, Towne Center Books, Pleasanton CA

“There are so many reasons why I love this book so much, and why I already know it’s one of my top three of the whole year. Having Eva’s story told through other supporting characters is pure genius. The food, the wine, the locations all had me transported as I read. And then there’s the writing; lovely, poignant, funny and descriptive. I wanted to know more about every peripheral person mentioned, and each chapter told its own complete story. The final chapter of the spectacular dinner brought every detail together in a way that was immensely satisfying. I’ve already been telling customers that they MUST get this book at the end of July. It is perfect for ANY reader who wants a wonderful heartfelt unique book”.
   —Carolyn Hutton, A Great Good Place for Books, Oakland, CA

“I thoroughly enjoyed this book. My Midwest connection was important but I think it would have appeal for anyone. The characters are so great and the author weaves their lives together in a most satisfying way. It’s a good thing for people to learn a bit of the flavor of the Midwest.”
   —Polly Gorder, Book Passage, Corte Madera, CA

“I have read Kitchens of the Great Midwest and I absolutely loved, loved, loved this book . . . it is so brilliant and I can’t wait to sell it.” —Barbara Chambers, Bay Books, Coronado, CA

“As a self-described foodie, any novel with chapters named after foods (even Lutefisk), is immediately appealing to me. And from the humble Lutefisk in the first chapter through the extravagant dinner in the last, I was captivated by the interconnected foods and people in J. Ryan Stradal’s—can I say delicious?—debut. The first paragraph (and many more) made me laugh, several had me in tears, and each new character in this story of families (both those you’re born into, and those you make) and food, was a wonder to read.” —Heather Duncan, Tattered Cover, Denver, CO

“It reminds me a bit of The Bone Clocks by David Mitchell . . . It’s a fabulous book, all the more impressive for being a debut, and I encourage everyone to pick it up as soon as it is published.”
   —Elayna Trucker, Napa Bookmine, Napa, CA
GRANDMA JOHNSON’S SALAD

(credit to Marsha Moen, First Lutheran Church Women Cookbook, 1984 edition)

1 pkg. (3 oz.) orange, lemon, or lime Jell-O
2 cups hot water
1 pkg. (8 oz.) cream cheese (softened)
1 cup carrots (shredded)
1 ½ cups miniature marshmallows
1 cup crushed pineapple (drained)
1 cup cream (whipped)


CREAMY AMBROSIA

(credit to Deb Mitzel, First Lutheran Church Women Cookbook, 1984 edition)

30 oz. can chunk pineapple, undrained
2 bananas, sliced
1 cup seedless green grapes, halved
10 oz. jar maraschino cherries, drained
11 oz. can mandarin oranges, undrained
16 oz. can peach slices, undrained
1 cup shredded coconut
3 ¾ oz. package instant lemon pudding and pie filling mix
8 oz. container Cool Whip

In large bowl, combine fruits and coconut. Sprinkle pudding mix into fruit, stirring slowly. Let stand 5 minutes (mixture will thicken as it stands). Fold in Cool Whip. Cover and refrigerate four hours or until completely chilled. Makes 20 ½-cup servings.
RHUBARB BARS
(credit to Lillian Curfman, First Lutheran Church Women Cookbook, 1969 edition)

3 cups rhubarb
¼ cup water
1 ½ cups sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
2 tablespoons corn starch

Dissolve corn starch in water; add other ingredients. Heat until thick. Set aside to cool.

1 ½ cups brown sugar
½ teaspoon soda
1 ½ cups oatmeal
¾ cup shortening
1 ½ cups flour
½ cup nuts

Mix until crumbly; put part of this in large cake pan. Add the rhubarb mixture; then place the rest of the crumb mixture over it. Bake 30 minutes at 375 degrees.

WISCONSIN SUSHI
(credit to Lindsay Kruse of Stillwater, MN—everyone starts out skeptical but then are totally converted after one [or five] of these)

6 large dill pickles
1 package of sliced salami
1 package (8 oz) of cream cheese, softened

Spread a layer of cream cheese over each pickle and then wrap with slices of salami. Cut into bite-sized slices, about half an inch thick.
SIX-LAYER DIP

(credit to Jodi Steele of Hastings, MN—this recipe has been passed down from her grandmother, and is a fixture at our Hastings Fantasy Football League draft parties [I've been in the same fantasy football league since 1996 with my high school friends; Jodi is the spouse of one of the fellow participants, Travis Steele].)

1 8oz. Package cream cheese (softened)
8oz. Sour Cream
1 packet taco seasoning
Mix these together and spread on large plate/serving tray

Top in circles from the outside in:
Chopped lettuce
Shredded cheese
Chopped tomato
Chopped green pepper
Diced black olives

Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate 2 hours or overnight.
Serve with tortilla chips for dipping.

POTATO PATTIES

(credit to Lois Bly Johnson, First Lutheran Church Women Cookbook, 1984 edition)

2 cups cold mashed potatoes
1 beaten egg
¼ cup finely chopped onion
¼ cup finely chopped celery
½ teaspoon salt
dash of pepper
2 tablespoons melted butter

Mix all ingredients together. Form into patties and brown in the hot butter. Makes six patties.
Good way to use left-over mashed potatoes.
**APEROLO SPRITZ**

(credit to Olivia Taylor Smith, certified sommelier and brilliant small press publicity maven)

3 parts prosecco
one part aperol
one part soda
garnish with an orange slice

**SWEDISH GLÖGG**

(this one is a mix of various traditional and family recipes; I'll credit it to Lars Thorvald)

3 sticks cinnamon
12 whole cloves
20 whole cardamom seeds
peels from one orange (try to avoid excess pith)
½ gallon of port wine
1 to 2 cups of sugar (to taste)
one fifth of bourbon, nothing fancy
1/2 cup of raisins
¼ cup of blanched almonds

Pour wine and bourbon into a large kettle and place on low heat. Tie cinnamon, cloves, cardamom seeds, and orange peel in a cheesecloth bag and add to alcohol mixture. Bring to simmer; do not boil. Caramelize the sugar and add to the warm alcohol mixture. Add raisins and almonds. Heat through for at least ten minutes, stirring continuously. Turn off the heat on the stove and light the mixture with a match to burn off a little excess alcohol, but the suffocate the flame with the kettle’s cover. Remove cheesecloth bag. Serve hot.

**EVERGREEN PUNCH**

(credit to Cornelia Larson, First Lutheran Church Women Cookbook, 1984 edition)

1 cup boiling water
1 3-oz. pkg. lime Jell-O
1 6-oz. frozen lemonade concentrate (not pink)
1 46-oz. can pineapple juice
1 qt. 7-Up

Dissolve Jell-O in water. Cool slightly. Mix rest of ingredients. May be garnished with crushed pineapple or lime sherbet. Makes 23 one-half cup servings. (Pretty green)
A FEW WINE SUGGESTIONS
(all $25 or under in most places)

Beckmen Vineyards Grenache Rose (rosé, California USA) My favorite domestic rosé so far; but I’m biased—I’ve been a fan of this vineyard for over a decade. California Grenache usually is higher in alcohol than its European counterparts, but when you serve this chilled, it won’t be so in your face about it.

Cleto Chiarli Lambrusco (sparkling red, Italy) I know that, according to Jarl Thorvald, Riunite is a place in the heart, but drier Lambrusco is good too.

Le Chaz Blanc (white wine, Languedoc, France) This is an excellent budget white that can be a daily drinker for 2015. If you want to spend a little more on a French white, hunt down a bottle of Picpoul de Pinet, which seems to be a popular choice in the UK right now.

Jean-Max Roger Menetou-Salon Cuvee Le Charnay (white wine, Loire, France) I love Sancerre, but don’t always feel like spending the Sancerre markup. This value white from a region a boulder’s throw away will give it a run for its money.

Maison Bleue Soleil Roussane (white wine, Washington, USA) Rousanne is an underrated white grape, and I increasingly like wine from Washington state.

Corte Gardoni Becco Rosso Corvina Veronese (red wine, Italy) Now here’s a lighter-bodied red I recently paired with salmon. Light enough that you could read a Minnesota Twins box score through a glass of this wine, but it still packs plenty of flavor. Scaia also makes a Corvina that’s a crowd-pleaser.

Vignobles Alain Jaume & Fils Close de Sixte Red (red wine, Lirac, France) I love Châteauneuf-du-Pape, but [see Sancerre] this region right across the river has extremely similar characteristics and is much less expensive.

Juan Gil Organic Honoro Vera Monastrell (red wine, Spain) My favorite red wine under eight bucks a bottle in Los Angeles (though I’ve seen it with a much higher price tag elsewhere).

Ecker Zweigelt "Brilliant" (red wine, Austria) A great summer red. The dark red cherry flavors make it perfect for BBQ and grilled meats. Almost all Austrian wines are organic and even biodynamic. May as well buy the liter bottle.

Bartolome Vernet Priorat (red wine, Spain) I love the wines of Priorat, and this is my favorite one that’s under $20 a bottle in most places. It stands on its own pretty well; I can imagine Eva drinking this Priorat while watching Wolf Hall. She loves Wolf Hall, she doesn’t care what you say about it.
Stucco Palace vs. River Falls Kitchen Party Mix

Braque Dragelski, Ann Richards, and the other softball players at the Stucco Palace love upbeat music, and so does Will Prager, when he’s not busy pining. This playlist is a mix of their tastes.

Will Prager’s Picks

When Will Prager is sad, he wants to wallow in it. This is the music that helps remind him how sad he is—it’s a collection of the most lovelorn tunes he knows.

Cindy’s Treadmill/Workout Mix

Cynthia Hargreaves Reyna is a complex woman, but her taste in workout music skews heavily towards her 1980s nostalgia (although her younger friend Kerensa Dille did get her into Cloud Cult while they were working together in Michigan).

Check out on Spotify:
Q. It’s clear from your book that you have great knowledge and love for food. Does this come from childhood or discovered in adulthood?

A. My interest in food began when I got my driver’s license, which took three tries—I was a famously terrible driver as a teenager. Growing up in a small town in Minnesota, I had a lot of wanderlust and a yearning to see the world, but couldn’t swing international travel on the money I was making as a janitor at the Steamboat Inn and as a clerk at Sam Goody. Therefore, with my high school girlfriend Stacy (who shared similar dreams) we hopped in my mom’s VW Golf, drove north on Highway 61 and hit all of the unusual and ethnic restaurants we could find up in the Twin Cities.

At college outside of Chicago, this trend continued. The parents of my college girlfriend Carly were really into wine; I went on my first trip to Napa Valley with them one year. That’s where another lifelong interest began.

Living in Los Angeles—where I finally learned to drive well; it was that or be killed—there’s no shortage of exceptional and interesting cuisine. Food is still a major motivation behind the international travel I’ve finally been able to do as an adult; my favorite culinary destination in the last few years has been Malaysia, no contest.

Q. Did the recipes featured in each chapter come from family/friend recipes, or did you have to research them? What made you decide on these dishes?

A. Five of the eight recipes came from the 1984 edition of “First Lutheran Church Women,” a cookbook released by the First Lutheran Church in Hunter, North Dakota, where my grandmother was born and raised. My great-grandmother has recipes in that volume. So some of these dishes have been in the family for generations.

I wanted to choose food that was particular to the Midwest, so things like lutefisk, sweet corn, venison, and dessert bars fit that bill, but I also didn’t want to merely adhere to the typical. My dad grows Serrano peppers in his garden in central Minnesota, and I know plenty of Minnesotans like him who enjoy spicy food. While not stereotypically representative of the Midwest, I wanted to demonstrate that passion as well, and I feel that Eva’s interest in Chocolate Habanero peppers also is a bit of a metaphor for my own wanderlust and interest in faraway places. I think it’s extremely typical for teens and pre-teens to venerate what’s exotic to them. That was absolutely true for me.

Q. What does the “J.” stand for?

A. It’s the result of a family argument. My dad’s side of the family is 100% Czech, mostly from a small town called Domazlice, and my dad was especially close to his “Stryc Joe” (stryc is Czech for uncle) who died shortly before I was born. My parents wanted to name me after him, but my superstitious Czech grandmother was having none of it. As a compromise, my parents named me “J. Ryan,” with the “J.” implicitly, but not legally, standing for “Joseph.” As a result, my birth certificate, passport, etc., all read “J. Ryan.” That said, the short answer is that the “J.” doesn’t
stand for anything—it’s just “J,” like the “S” in Harry S. Truman or the J in Homer J. Simpson. I didn’t even know about the “J.” until I was ten or eleven, when I came across my birth certificate. Until then, my relatives and friends called me Ryan. Some still do.

Q. Did you draw Eva from any people or experiences in your life?

A. Eva is the largest amalgam of people I’ve ever written, but she’s mostly me, especially as represented in her pre-teen years. I didn’t grow exotic peppers in my closet, but I had pretty obscure and all-encompassing obsessions, and I was relentlessly bullied on the bus. It was a tough time, and my interests—which helped me feel connected to a larger world outside of this small, hurtful one—kept me going.

Q. What made you decide to tell Eva’s story mostly through the point-of-view of other characters?

A. I set out to write a story about redemption through empathy, and it seemed like an inherently empathetic structure; I wanted Eva to face conflict and challenges, but I didn’t want there to be a villain or an anti-hero as such. I felt that, in the case of the characters who might initially be the hardest to like, getting in their heads and feeling their pain was a way of ameliorating any “straw man” aspects to their characterizations.

Q. Do any of the characters reflect your own personality or experiences?

A. All of them, I think. I feel that at one point or another, I have been every single one of these people. There’s only one character directly based on myself, though, and I’ll leave it for the readers to figure out who that is.

Q. In addition to being a writer, you have also worked on a number of reality shows. Do those experiences factor into your stories? Did working on those shows give you any good material or inspiration?

A. The shows I worked on were very different from each other and in each case, I didn’t interact with the talent very much. Maybe there are vestiges of TV personalities in characters like Octavia. I do have to say that editing unscripted TV is an extremely useful narrative exercise. When you’re trying to get a twenty-nine minute rough cut down to twenty-one minutes and thirty seconds, and you only have a few days, at most, to do it, you have to develop an instinct for the necessary. Fortunately, I learned from some of the best—folks like Jeff Conroy, John Gray, and Phil Segal, who have all won multiple Emmys. However, I have never explicitly written about TV or based any character on anyone I met in that world. Too soon, maybe.

Q. What’s the best meal you have ever had?

A. Extremely tough question. I can think of several, and they all were really more about the people present at the meal than the food involved. In cities like Los Angeles that are confederations of individuals split from families and lifelong friends, we form our own families of choice, and food is a unifier, a value system, a mode of expression, an attractor. While the food may have been unbelievable at some of the gatherings I remember most, the people involved were, invariably, the point of the whole affair. I think that’s ultimately true for Eva as well.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. From an early age, Eva is obsessed with food and cooking. What influences shape her interest?

2. How would you characterize the Midwest as Stradal paints it in this book? What makes the setting unique and important for this particular story?

3. Stradal structures the novel as a collection of smaller vignettes from many different points of view. What are the advantages of this narrative style?

4. Throughout the novel, characters and stories intersect in unexpected ways. Which of these connections surprised you most? Which seem most important to Eva’s story?

5. Food takes center stage in this book. How does it bring people together and how does it keep them apart?

6. At times, Stradal seems to poke fun at foodie culture. Which scenes or exchanges between characters struck you as a strong commentary on this foodie evolution?

7. Eva Thorvald is the heroine of the novel, but in some ways she is still quite mysterious. What is it about her that draws people to her?

8. From Lars to Eva to Pat, Stradal’s characters have their own prejudices about food and the way it should be made. What are some of their ideas, and which ones do you agree or disagree with?

9. Cindy has always claimed she would never be a good mother. Why does she insist on this and do you believe her?

10. The recipes prepared in Eva’s feast serve as a walk through her memory. How do foods or recipes play a role in your own memory or life story?