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Eat Me: The Food and Philosophy of Kenny Shopsin. Kenny Shopsin and Carolynn Carreño. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, 260 pages, $24.95 hardback.

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The best titles resonate, as does *Eat Me: The Food and Philosophy of Kenny Shopsin* by Kenny Shopsin and Carolynn Carreño. "Eat Me" is described, in those dictionaries which include it, as a "rude phrase" essentially meaning "fuck off." Shopsin's logo, created by notable designer Laurie Rosenwald, features the phrase "Shopsin's General Store" and folds to reveal its hidden message: "Eat Me." Kenny Shopsin is pictured in this book wearing a t-shirt with the logo, and another photograph shows how to perform the equivalent of *Mad Magazine*'s classic fold in. Surely Shopsin must find "Eat Me," secreted within what was once the restaurant's name, consequential.

The book's authors have very wisely included, as a preface, a 1992 *New Yorker* article by Calvin Trillin which brilliantly summarizes Shopsin's fame, his notoriety, his allure, his eccentricities and his genius (an often indistinguishable pair) and the line-in-the-sand attitude which defines the title. This article provides an indispensable perspective for reading a volume which bookstores are shelving in the Cookbook section, but which transcends categories. As the subtitle promises, it is a personal philosophy, a philosophy often fascinating, useful, and funny. Arguably, the subtitle could shift the book into the company of autobiographies, but it also has chunks of history (of an era and of a neighborhood), savory insights into psychology, unique lashings of cooking theory, insights into contemporary culture, whimsical graphics, and perceptive observations on everything from kitchen implements to the value of mistakes.

Much more than a cookbook, this is a moral stance, a credo, and one hears in Shopsin's philosophy some very extraordinary echoes. The apparently flippant *Eat Me*, for example, which condenses Shopsin's supposedly curmudgeonly, even abrasive, attitude toward would-be customers who violate either his "rules" or his instinctive warning system against them, appears, written on a cake with currants, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. When Alice eats it, she changes size, and as a giant she is most distressed. The Epilogue to this book is "The Art of Staying Small," an essential tenet of Shopsin's recipe for emotional success, if not happiness. And any child of the sixties sees in the Alice "Eat Me" a commentary on expanding one's personal universe, an appeal, as Jefferson Airplane put it, to "feed your head."

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Shopsin's sustenance is both physical and metaphysical. Apparently, for him, the two are indivisible. While this may sound grandiose, *Eat Me* reads at times as if it is a DIY book using cooking and recipes as guideposts for a culture which has taken a wrong turn. Analogies can move very swiftly from illuminating to irritating, but it may be worth the risk to point out that Shopsin's *Eat Me* is simultaneously a declaration and an invitation: those who eat Shopsin's food are in a sense partaking of him, for he truly is what he does. Kenny Shopsin makes it plain that in his philosophy, food is communion.

Dostoevsky wrote, "If it were desired to reduce a man to nothing, it would be necessary only to give his work the character of uselessness." Kurt Vonnegut explored this idea in *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, concluding that fewer and fewer Americans could see any practical results of their "work," neither a real or essential product or anything to be proud of: office workers herd sheep or tend cattle six or seven removes from the real thing, assembly line workers do not manufacture automobiles but simply tighten the same two bolts day after day, people bid on the future price of soybeans, but they are not producing soybeans; they are simply attempting to acquire money. Establishing money as the primary goal of all "work," according to Vonnegut, caused the American Dream to turn belly up and go green. Shopsin's credo places him firmly in the company of Dostoevsky and Vonnegut. His policies, as well as his decor and his methods of running a restaurant, "exist mostly to help me maintain the kind of a restaurant I want to have. They make my days and my kids' days more pleasant and easier so we can continue to enjoy what we do, which is the only reason we *do* what we do. Shopsin's has never been about making money. It is our *lives*." Kenny Shopsin may never write a novel, but his cookbook includes some of the grand themes of these great novelists.

Community is a critical dimension of Shopsin's. As he says, "the thing that makes my restaurant special is my relationships with my customers — and the way they relate and interact with one another. With the wrong people in here, those interactions don't happen, so in order to keep the wrong people out . . . I have rules people have to abide by in order to be here." *Eat Me* makes it clear that not only do these rules help make Shopsin's more like his living room than a restaurant, they reflect how Kenny Shopsin wants to live his life. When he changed the general store into a restaurant, he closed on the weekends so the family could be together. His children's toys and games contributed to the restaurant's décor, as did the gumball machines and free candy; it became an extension of his family and his self. Because of this basic tenet, Shopsin wants more from his customers than just money, he wants a relationship: "Once we've established a rapport, we're absolute equals in my restaurant." He rejects the adage that the customer is always right, or that money brings certain rights with it in his restaurant (clearly he rejects the Supreme Court Buckley v Valejo ruling which gave money rights). With the restaurant, as with his grocery store, Shopsin became a part of hundreds of lives; he and his customers comprise a community. Community, according to Kurt Vonnegut, makes us all better people; it fulfills a basic need. It is at once a corrective to greed and a means to pleasure.

"I have contact with every customer. Usually I have a conversation with them, but at the very least I cook their food; I touch every plate that goes out at Shopsin's. There is an inherent value in this that is intangible and priceless. It has to do with traditional American values and with humanity. Over the years I've found that it's something that people really crave. It's why those of us who live in cities choose to live in cities and, why people who come to Shopsin's come to Shopsin's." Shopsin

includes anecdotes of his interactions with vendors, almost all of them "based on mutual trust and affection." One anecdote is illustrative: "The man I work with there doesn't speak English, so the way it works is I call in the morning and I say, 'Fat guy with motorcycle.' His response is 'One case?' I say 'Thank you,' and hang up. Later that day the shrimp are delivered. Just like that. No money, no receipt, no signature. When finally I feel that I owe somewhere between $400 and $800, I motorcycle down to the shop."

Community, which implies trust, and usefulness are only a small part of Shopsin's recipe for living. Creativity, too, is an essential ingredient of his philosophy. A large part of his fame is generated by his monumental menu, often running to more than nine hundred dishes and constantly changing. One of the pleasures of the book is learning how Shopsin can manage so many dishes, being able to make any of them quickly and efficiently. He has customized his own utensils, and he has "deconstructed" the process of cooking. His eureka moment was turning the traditional approach to soup on its head. After mastering a technique to produce chicken pot pies quickly and efficiently, it occurred to him that he had been "making a cream of chicken soup with less liquid" and "by adding more stock" he could "turn it into a soup." Thus began a signature dish — soup — and a dish which constantly invites the comparison between Shopsin and Jerry Seinfeld's Soup Nazi, a comparison he explores.

The names of the soups, and his other dishes as well, are part of the fun and the creativity: "Blisters On My Sisters," "Floating Islands," "Postmodern Pancakes," "Slutty Cakes," "Senegalese Cherry Soup," "Carmine Street Enchiladas," "Alta Cocker," "Ché," "sinwiches," "Fellini," "Sillycibin." Often it seems the naming is as rewarding as creating the recipe. At times the name comes first, and he rarely worries about culinary "accuracy": "A lot of times when I name a dish for a certain country — in fact, probably *most* of the time — it is not because the dish exists in that country, but because for me the dish has the telltales of that country's cuisine." In a bold attempt at synesthesia, he wanted to name a soup after a madras shirt he wore in high school, a shirt that always made him feel good when he wore it. He put Indian spices into Madras soup, but "that is not really what the soup is about. It's really about the shirt."

Again and again, Shopsin's pride is in the "connect" he makes with customers, with food, with friends. The connection is not simply ambience, as in many upscale uptown restaurants; rather it is a human connection. Craftsmanship is a means to connection. Cooking is a craft for Shopsin, and he takes pride in his craftsmanship. But clearly he is both artist and craftsman. After observing that "a pancake is an illusion," his griddling directions advise to serve all pancakes "with the B-side, the topping side, up." Why? "These rules are for purely aesthetic reasons, but that doesn't make them any less important." Aesthetics, too, contribute to the "connect."

Shopsin shares numerous insights into his own creativity, many of them in the chapter "The Building Blocks of Creativity, or How I Do What I Do." "The real question is not *how* I can make nine hundred or five thousand items to order, but *why* I make all those items. And the answer essentially is that I do it because I want to. And because I am neurotically obsessed in a way that, luckily, is not unhealthy and does not hurt anyone . . . . Cooking for me is a creative process, and I believe that people who are creative are creative for one of two reasons. Either they are going for truth and beauty, or they create as a way to dilute the venom produced by their subconscious minds." With the honesty and awareness that characterizes the entire book, he observes "I cook for the second reason." Cooking puts him in a

"cathartic, recuperative process." He then very perceptively accounts for the dynamic nature of his art and craft, noting that a characteristic of anxiety that derives from one's childhood is that "whatever is wrong with you reinvents itself every day. The trick is to turn torment into something positive in your life, which for me is food. The result of this cycle is that I am constantly creating new things. Not only have I had as many as nine hundred items on my menu at one time, but I am constantly adding new things and taking off those things that don't sell or that I don't like to make."

And because Shopsin's primary goal is not money, and because he intentionally "stays small," he can do what he wants. He can enjoy a constant tinkering with recipes and experimentation with food. He can indulge his inventiveness and entertain himself. Shopsin writes that his kind of creativity has a "lower than average repugnance for failure. It goes beyond a willingness to take risks to a willingness to fail miserably." It is a point he makes more than once, and it puts him in the company of Stephen Dedalus who observes, in *Ulysses*, that "a man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery."

Kenny Shopsin's philosophy is rich and often wise: he analyzes his food, his processes, and ultimately himself. And a very big part of that self is obviously whimsy. James Joyce wrote, "not *in vino veritas* but *in risu veritas*, and the truth of Shopsin's humor is obvious in the names of his dishes and in the décor of his restaurant, bits of which are documented in photos throughout the book, from the "All Our Cooks Wear Condoms" sign to a Wimpy figurine. *Eat Me* is filled, aptly enough, with numerous lovely color photographs of Shopsin's dishes, and it also has a number of images wittily juxtaposed with the text. For example, Halloween vampire fangs are biting down on garlic bread just below the Garlic Bread recipe. Shopsin prefers chocolate milk "with Jackson-Pollock-like splatters of the syrup floating in the milk," and the accompanying photo captures the appeal. He includes a Tenniel Alice picture, which indicates that his book title was consciously allusive. Many of the images are richly entertainingly or subtly literate: what Steve Allen fan wouldn't smile at a picture of the Nairobi Trio? There is also a painting of Shopsin's late wife, Eve, by Sean Lennon, and of Kenny's stove by Sam Messer. His restaurant, like his recipes, is a wonder of diversity.

Shopsin doesn't ignore the much explored connection between food and sex. Movies have explored it, from the famous eating scene in *Tom Jones* to *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Babette's Feast*, and *Chocolat*, to name a very few. Shopsin's observations range from the erotic to the slightly crass: his cream of Garlic Soup "has a nice fluffy texture to it, like nipples when you suck on them." "It's just that everything I cook, every time I cook, is an event in and of itself. It's like when you have sex; you approach it each time to do the best you possibly can, as if it were the only time. You don't have to think about what you are doing because you are 100 percent in the moment — and each time it turns out a little bit different." Shopsin observes that when food "clicks" eating satisfies like orgasm, that pressing down unnecessarily with a spatula is onanistic, and that pancakes are a luxury, a recreation, like smoking marijuana or sexual dalliance. He makes an indecent reference to sausage casing and finds French Toast explicitly erotic. Yet he moves gracefully from the erotic to the crass and on to the childlike, observing that, ultimately, he has a *Goodnight Moon* philosophy: "In a *Goodnight Moon* world it's pretty easy to be a good home cook." And "it is all about having the kind of confidence and awareness that comes from *Goodnight Moon* living, in which you are happy with what is already in your life." Such transitions are as amusing as they are surprising.

As he began this book, Shopsin's biggest fear was that, "by its very nature, a book is a stagnant thing," once published it is unchanging, very unlike his restaurant, his thoughts, his personality, his conversations, and his cooking. Like the best of books, however, *Eat Me* is dynamic rather than static, rewarding re-readings, just as it repays scrutiny and contemplation with new insights. Shopsin ranges across a vast and diverse territory, from the trap of working now to be comfortable later, to the theories of his "culinary fictions." The writing itself is at once enlightening and entertaining, with unusual metaphors ("The combination of ingredients is sort of an ontological thing, like the fish walking out of the ocean onto the land — and it also happens to taste real good.") and sly allusions ("Betty Boop type cooks"). For all its diversity, *Eat Me* has a wonderful unity. One reviewer, who complained of the garish cover, surely was blind to the big picture, to the book's greatest virtue: its wholeness. One of the longest chapters is "Life in Eggville," a chapter seminal in its exploration of his discovery that cooking "is all about the process." The book's cover is egg yolk yellow, with the title enclosed within a white, egg-shaped cutout. The brick motif at the bottom suggests both Shopsin's general store and Humpty-Dumpty's wall: the precarious adventure of life in eggville. Like the book itself, the cover resonates with meaning and implied meaning.

The primary reason people buy cookbooks is the recipes, of course, and this book is filled with Shopsin's recipes. Most of his more famous dishes would seem to be included, yet with over a thousand recipes and variations upon recipes to choose from, the selection is certain to displease those whose favorites are missing. "Ray's Chicken Garlic Angelhair" and "Juanita" are among the numerous missing recipes which surely will disappoint those after whom they are christened. However, Shopsin has wisely chosen to write a book, not present a catalogue. The recipes included are often whimsically presented, but they are always clear and, as he promises, honest. It is a book for those who seek the adventure of new recipes, and it is also a book for eaters. Above all, though, it is a book that can be read beneficially by those who have absolutely no intention of cooking anything. It is credo and communion.