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Choices in food literature abound

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You didn't realize this, but there is an art to giving food lit during the holidays, an art increasingly under attack, set upon by moralistic back-to-foraging types at one end, and besieged by thoughtful mourners of a fading way of life on the other. And sure, they mean well. Many of their books are essential; the body of literature dedicated to eating and food-centric morality -- as opposed to cooking the stuff -- has grown so vast in the last decade, and become as vital as business writing was in the 1990s, it has earned its own shelf in many bookstores. But do you really want to give Michael Pollan this holiday season?

The following is a cheat sheet for those itching to gift wrap some new food lit, but even more anxious about keeping the season jolly:

Instead of: Anything from Michael Pollan ("In Defense of Food," "The Omnivore's Dilemma") or including the term "industrialized food"...

Give: ["Eating: A Memoir"](#) (Knopf, \$25), by Jason Epstein, an intentional whiff of a personal history, but charming and smart. It's a book-length discussion of the places he has eaten, the food he has eaten and people he has eaten it with, courtesy of a famed publisher, the legendary editorial director of Random House and founder of the New York Review of Books. His favorite recipes (21's "Black and Blue" hamburger, his favorite lobster dish from French master Joel Robuchon) break up what is basically a series of well-remembered anecdotes (a business lunch with Jackie O., etc.), but, as a package, a perfectly brief reminder about the importance of great meals, and savoring the memories.

Instead of: Jonathan Safran Foer's new "Eating Animals" (Little Brown, \$25.99), in which the author of "Everything Is Illuminated" considers the things we tell ourselves to justify eating meat (one chapter is titled "A Case for Eating Dogs"), or Julie Powell's "Julie and Julia" follow-up, "Cleaving: A Story of Marriage, Meat, and Obsession" (Little Brown, \$24.99), in which Powell takes time off from her rocky marriage and leaves town to learn butchery.

Give: ["Why Italians Love to Talk About Food"](#) (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, \$35), a wandering encyclopedia, travel guide and history, at times ploddingly told, but unlike much else. Elena Kostioukovich, who was Umberto Eco's Russian translator, walks us from north to south, each stop densely researched. There are no recipes. Photos are gorgeous, if sparse. And the tone is reminiscent of a long, discursive meal. (Risotto, for instance, is "always finished after the famished guests have already arrived.")

Instead of: "Save the Deli" (Houghton Mifflin, \$24) by David Sax, a necessary, though elegiac, appreciation of the history, and the menus, and the (declining) fortunes of this culinary institution....

Give: ["Appetite City: A Culinary History of New York"](#) (North Point Press, \$30), by William Grimes, former restaurant critic for the New York Times. Not the most important restaurant city in the world, one could argue, but that's not the right argument, Grimes suggests. He walks us from restaurant-free streets of the early 1900s to open kitchens of 2004, and through a brisk, fun study of how a culinary afterthought became the most complex and irritating restaurant city on the planet. As one commentator says: "New Yorkers only want to go to places where they can't get in." Does it really matter they said it in 1909?

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