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The Gourmand's Dilemma

The Green and the Red by ARMAND CHAUVEL

Ashland Creek Press, 2014 \$15.95

Reviewed by JENNA GERSIE

Translated from the French (*Le Vert et Le Rouge*) by Elisabeth Lyman, Armand Chauvel's first novel is an entertaining tale of two people with strong career goals and stronger opinions on what to eat.

Léa is the chef and owner of La Dame Verte, a vegetarian restaurant in Rennes, France. Passionate about her work and her goal to recruit others to vegetarianism through delicious cuisine, Léa hasn't yet been able to stabilize her bank account and fears her whole venture will go bankrupt.

Mathieu is the marketing director for Nedelec Pork, a family business, and creator of the garlic-flavored cocktail sausage and the wild-berry sausage, which have been met with great success. While vying for the opening general manager position at the company, Mathieu suggests building a museum devoted to pork, which will include a stand where visitors can sample Nedelec Pork products.

But the prime location for the sausage-shaped museum is right next to La Dame Verte. Mathieu goes undercover as a vegetarian to learn more about Léa and how he might be able to put her out of business. Love affairs, a pet miniature pig, and a symbolic piggy bank add both drama and humor to the conflict that breaks out between the vegetarians and the carnivores.

As is true in contemporary culture, the lack of understanding and tolerance about others' food choices come to the fore

in the novel. Stereotyping against both vegetarians and meat-eaters is rampant, but the satire makes for a light and funny read, no matter where one falls on the dietary spectrum between herbivore and carnivore.

For example, Mathieu and the Nedelecs feel threatened by the "salad-eaters" (157), though they make up a rather small portion of France's population. But the flesh-eaters certainly don't know their enemy very well. Léa is the first vegetarian that Mathieu has ever met, and he is befuddled by their conversation:

It was like encountering an alien. Except there was no visible deformity—green skin, antennae sprouting from her head, crooked little finger—to indicate that she was any different from normal people. (52)

Besides thinking that vegetarians are alien-like, the Nedelec Pork team sees them as "bloodthirsty maniacs" (72), not realizing the irony. "We're dealing with fanatics—vampires who want our hemoglobin. Any member of the Nedelec family knows that" (72).

The attacks are not one-sided, however. Though the pork producers may appear to be extremists in their insecurity at the potential success of a small vegetarian restaurant and their claims of the nutritional benefits of processed meat products, the vegetarians can be just as extreme, instigating a violent brawl at a Veggie Pride event, to Léa's embarrassment.

Beneath the satire, though, are real questions about food consumption. One man struggles with maintaining a vegetarian diet and confesses to Léa that

sometimes, he slips. Léa's assistant, Pervenche, berates Léa for not carefully reading labels on food products. Mathieu worries about a pain in his gut and wonders if it is related to his meat consumption. And Léa herself struggles with her morals as she buys a packet of foie gras in order to create the perfect vegetarian imitation foie gras recipe.

For the first half of the novel, it is hard to tell whether the "carrot-munching ayatollahs" (13) or the "murderers" (54) will come out ahead, but ultimately, *The Green and the Red* is a case for vegetarianism, or at least reduced meat consumption. (The author is vegetarian and the translator is vegan.) The book opens with Léa wondering how much mercury is in the tuna she has wrongly been served, and she doesn't hesitate to drop statistics about the horrors of meat production—from an animal rights and environmental perspective—throughout the rest of the book. A gastroenterologist advises a patient on the benefits of a plant-based diet. The comic struggle of Mathieu and his date getting stuck in a giant pile of seaweed while horseback riding on the beach is really an explanation of the effects of nitrate runoff

from hog manure into the ocean. And a visit to an industrial pig farm by Léa and other members of the Rennes Vegetarian Society reveals some of the sorry details of meat production about which many omnivores are happy to remain ignorant.

Vegetarian, omnivore, or carnivore—whether you prefer the "pumpkin wonton soup . . . mushroom and polenta mousseline . . . and flourless chocolate cake" (48) or the "pork tenderloin with truffled potato croquettes" (154)—this book is sure to leave you with a growling stomach. Perhaps it will leave you thinking a little more carefully about your food choices, too. Léa asks a disgruntled meat-eater at the conclusion of the tale: "And you, can you tell me that the smell of grilled eggplant with shallots, garlic, thyme, and Espelette pepper doesn't make you hungry?" (170). The meat-eater walks away with a frown, but Léa can only hope she has given him some food for thought.

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