

Dying for a Taste: A Sally Solari Mystery

Leslie Karst

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This is a zesty literary amuse-bouche that will leave readers salivating for more.

Leslie Karst's debut mystery, *Dying for a Taste: A Sally Solari Mystery*, brings a mix of quirky characters, culinary references, and scenic California locales that is as fresh as the organic produce arriving daily at Sally's Aunt Letta's restaurant, Gauguin.

Letta is the iconoclast in her big extended family. She didn't want to work at Solari's, the family's pasta-and-red-sauce Italian restaurant in Santa Cruz, but headed north to live in San Francisco for many years before returning home to open her own fine-dining establishment. When Letta is killed at Gauguin's, Sally, a former attorney, finds herself torn between continuing to help out with the family business, trying to keep Gauguin's afloat, and finding her aunt's murderer. It doesn't help that the police view Gauguin's sous chef, Javier, as the prime suspect, but Sally is convinced that he is innocent and enlists her oenophilic district attorney ex-boyfriend to find the real culprit.

Karst's deft dialogue and well-developed characters make this a satisfying mystery. She is generous with sensual descriptions of local scenery and restaurant kitchen doings, and her mouthwatering accounts of Sally's home cooking, restaurant meals, and one memorable farm-to-table event really add zest. Karst appends four recipes featured in the story at the end of the book and lards this culinary mystery with topical information about humanely raised meat, as well as sustainable seafood and agricultural practices.

Even with all these plot threads and serious asides, Karst writes with a light, often humorous style. Sally's inner thoughts accentuate the prose, as when she discovers that Javier has been in love with Letta: "That sure threw a spatula in the works." Or when she describes her much-revered grandfather's homemade wine as really just "plonk."

Dying for a Taste is a successful blend of mystery and foodie novels. Karst does an excellent job of tossing in interesting tidbits about mixology, menu planning, opera, botany, cycling, lesbian culture, small farms, and even accounting. This amuse-bouche will leave readers salivating for the next Sally Solari mystery sometime very soon.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (Spring 2016)

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