



Grand Forks: A History of American Dining in 128 Reviews

Marilyn Hagerty

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A legendary 86-year-old food critic brings together a collection of the best down-home, no-nonsense restaurant reviews-from Red Lobster to Le Bernadin-culled from her fifty year career

Writing for her local North Dakota newspaper, the Grand Forks Herald since 1957, Marilyn Hagerty went from obscurity to overnight sensation in 2012 when her earnest, admiring review of a local Olive Garden went viral. Among the denizens of the food world-obsessive gastronomes who celebrate Alice Waters and Michael Pollan, revere all things artisanal, and have made kale salad a staple on upscale urban menus-Hagerty's review ignited a fiery debate over the state of American culture. Anthony Bourdain defended Hagerty as an authentic voice of the larger American culture-one that is not dictated by the biases of the food snobbery that define the coasts.

In this refreshing, unpretentious collection that includes more than 200 reviews culled from a voluminous archive spanning over fifty years, Hagerty reveals how most Americans experience the pleasure of eating out. Bourdain hails Grand Forks as, "a history of American dining-in the vast spaces between the jaded palates and professional snarkologists of the privileged coasts-as told by one hard working small city journalist. . . . We watch American dining change over time, in baby steps. Traditional regional Scandinavian giving way to big chains, first iterations of sushi, early efforts at hipster chic. Part Fargo, part Lake Wobegone. It's the antidote to snark. This book kills cynics dead."

Grand Forks: A History of American Dining in 128 Reviews Details

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From Reader Review Grand Forks: A History of American Dining in 128 Reviews for online ebook

Patrick says

Marilyn Haggerty is an admirable person. She is a fair, polite, sincere, and humble restaurant critic, balanced beyond what I thought is humanly possible. On the day of judgment, I would like to have my life assessed by Marilyn Haggerty.

Her book has a problem, though. The restaurants she reviews are not the most exciting ones -- the book is a collection of her reviews of Grand Forks, North Dakota, restaurants from the years 1987 to 2012, originally published in the Grand Forks Herald.

I thoroughly enjoyed the first dozen or so reviews that I read, but 240 pages of them is just too much.

(I wish I could have reviewed this book like Marilyn Haggerty would have done. She deserves better than this.)

Anton Prosser says

I picked this up because Bourdain wrote the introduction, and it was a good choice. Haggerty isn't writing about food the way everyone seems to write about food now. She's writing for and about her community. That means letting people know if visiting the new Arby's is worthwhile and where you can go for your favorite Norwegian comfort food and who has the best egg rolls. This plain prose doesn't go into raptures over anything, and that's kind of refreshing in the current era of gushing/scathing reviews. I think what I loved so much about reading this revolves around the little details - from the Norwegian heritage of the area, the names of people running restaurants in the town and the fondness for institutions to the gradual introduction of more and more Asian cuisines, a restaurant run by a refugee family, the evolution of the town's dining landscape in the wake of natural disaster. It's compelling and interesting, and one day a person writing a thesis on the history of American dining will be grateful for all those details Haggerty provides.

Amy says

This was great, And not just because she's a North Dakotan! I really enjoyed her writing style, and am only disappointed that I can't check some of these places out.

Bookworm says

If you think her name sounds familiar, it might be because she wrote a review of the Olive Garden in Grand Forks in 2012 that went viral. This book is basically what it says: 128 of her reviews, including that infamous Olive Garden one. :) However, it really isn't a history of American dining: I'd say 80% of her reviews are on American-focused cuisine at Grand Forks (or area) restaurants. Others are a smattering of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Native American reviews. There are also reviews from MN and NY, but those are very few.

It's not great literature, but that's the point. I really found her style of reviewing refreshing: it was like talking to someone who might be a friend instead of a food critic in say The New York Times or The Los Angeles Times, etc. She goes to a restaurant, quite often with a friend (initially her husband, but after he dies and even before then other family and friends often join her), orders food, talks about the prices and quality, and often makes observations about the other diners, wait staff and even the owners.

It was more personal and less pretentious. It strikes me as a contrast with former food critic Ruth Reichl, who wrote 3 hilarious books about her journey as a food critic and personal life. I love Reichl's books, but she was obviously reviewing for a very different set of restaurants for a very different audience. Marilyn really lets her reviews do the talking and that's nice.

What I found both hilarious and sad was how she relates the prices. Although I've never been to Grand Forks or North Dakota, I almost wanted to laugh and/or cry at how cheap eating out used to be, chain stores or otherwise. Around the mid to late 90's did I start seeing prices for items that seems more reflective of prices today.

There is also sometimes a sad little note at the end of some of the reviews that discuss the fate of the restaurants. Many close, some due to a flood in 1997 and a few due to health code violations. However, some have no note and it is unsurprising to see many of the chains she wrote about in the 90's are apparently still operating.

Perhaps the author has had her 15 minutes, but I was happy to support her in buying this book. However, it's probably not of much interest unless you happen to live and/or will visit the area or for those who want to look at restaurant reviewing as a profession. Browse at the bookstore or library first.

Julie Barrett says

A little goes a long way! Whew. It's fun reading these old reviews of restaurants in a small town in North Dakota (small to me though Professor Google tells me that at a population of 50,000 Grand Forks is the third largest town on the state. Size is relative, huh?). However, is it nearly 250 pages of fun? Not for me. My fun-o-meter petered out at about 100 pages and then I skimmed the rest. Reading a 30 year old review of a diner, or even better, of MacDonalds and Taco Bell, is interesting. I liked the author's pieces. I just ran out of steam. Once you've read a hundred of her reviews, you've read them all. No need to keep going.

Ronna says

Light and enjoyable. Made me long for some of the older 'basic' restaurants we had growing up in the prairies.

Joanna says

Marilyn Hagerty is not a remarkable food critic, and Grand Forks, North Dakota is not really a hub of restaurant culture. But what makes this book so interesting is story that is captured over time - twenty five years of reviews are included here - about dining in America.

In the early years, it's all about Blue Plate Specials, pot pies, and local specialties of Norwegian and Germanic cuisine. [I freely admit to being previous unaware of lefse (a soft flat potato bread) and lutefisk (fish steeped in lye?!) before I picked up this book.] Then, slowly, the names of chain restaurants begin to encroach. Taco Bell (a cool pastel oasis, per Mrs. Hagerty), Subway (where you have to make too many choices), and Dairy Queen are among the first to appear. They are later joined by McDonalds, Red Lobster, Wendy's, Arby's, Applebee's. The heartbreaking element of this picture is written in the epigraphs following each review, how many of the small family owned businesses are no longer in business, and how many of the chains are still operating and thriving in the area.

Marilyn Hagerty reviews every new restaurant in town. She goes to the chains, she revisits old favorites, she looks into the restaurants that operate out of truck stops, meals served at the VFW, local dinner theater offerings, and everything in between. Her writing style reminds me of Dot Weems' bulletins in Fried Green Tomatoes and the Whistle Stop Cafe. (Sample observation: "Pretty good. That's exactly what Constant Companion says when he is pleased with something. Men don't get exuberant.") She is folksy and plain spoken. She tells you what she likes (white table linens, cloth napkins, servers who do not swoop in to clear your plates before everyone in the party is done eating) and what she doesn't (spelling errors on menus, overly salty soup, plastic silverware).

Through it all, she has a politeness that I associate with my grandmother's generation, a desire to accentuate the positive in any experience, instead of dwelling on the minuses of any particular restaurant experience. She's also not a genuinely adventurous eater (if a Rueben or a club sandwich is on the menu, she may not need to look further for her order) but she is genuinely engaged in the enterprise of food reporting as she tries lavosh bread for the first time, or orders a chickpea curry, and even - towards the end of the book - octopus while in New York. When she doesn't seem to like the food she might describe it as "good enough" or "adequate" and then quickly move on to describing the restaurant's decor in detail.

The book also winds up being an unintentional chronicle of life in Grand Forks both before and after the flood that ravaged this area of North Dakota in 1997. And a chronicle of Marilyn Hagerty's life before and after the death - during the year they spend in Bismarck while Grand Forks was recovering from the devastation - of her husband and Constant Companion. You get a sense of her pluck as she goes out for new meals with friends old and new after she gets back to town. Although this is a book that is composed entirely of restaurant reviews, it captures so much more in its pages.

The only reason that I am not giving this book five stars is that I think less might have been more in terms of some of the inclusions here. Her unaffected style is great, but over the course of 128 reviews, starts to seem a bit repetitive towards the end.

But, as we are likely to see the end of daily printed newspapers in my lifetime, it makes me unaccountably happy that Marilyn Hagerty and her Eatbeat column can still exist in this world. She is one of the last of her breed, and I really enjoyed her company over the course of this collection.

Lauren says

"What point, I wonder, is there in tearing down some hardworking restaurant people? Sometimes I point out pluses and minuses. And if a place is just too bad, I move on. I don't write about it."

Marilyn Hagerty is a national treasure, a five star gem, in a world of Negative Nancys. I imagine her column is enjoyable to read in the local paper but, a compilation of these reviews is a bit much.

The most interesting thing here is following the dining and financial trends through the years as local gives way to big chains. See, the apparently (in)famous Olive Garden review that led to this book.

Rhiannon says

The sameness grew tedious and I resorted to skimming towards the end.

Beth says

I lived in Grand Forks for about five years after I got out of college, and subscribed to the Grand Forks Herald. I recalled Marilyn Haggerty's name from the paper, and was delighted to see her review of the new Olive Garden in Grand Forks go viral a few years back.

This book consists of her reviews of various restaurants in and around Grand Forks, and they are a complete hoot, because she is so honestly guileless and kind in her words. "Minnesota Nice" has got nothin' on Marilyn. She reviews everything from Sanders 1907 (probably the nicest restaurant in Grand Forks) to the east side Dairy Queen and Wendy's. She is always honest in her assessments, but her criticisms are said in a very kind way. She really appreciates glasses made of actual glass, cloth napkins or thick paper napkins, and she doesn't like it when the wait staff is TOO attentive.

I remember a few of the restaurants from my time there, but many of them were wiped out in the flood of '97. You might recall stories on the news that showed downtown Grand Forks flooded but on fire. It was horrible, but no one lost their life in the flood. It was a little heartbreaking to read about so many places lost to the flood waters.

Marilyn continues to write, and Grand Forks continues on. I plan on keeping this book handy for when I need a little pick-me-up on a bad day. I don't know how anyone can read her reviews without being totally charmed.

Bibliomama says

I finished half of this book. I picked it up at a Dollar Tree and read it after Anthony Bourdain died. He wrote the introduction.

This is a very quiet, gentle book. If you're looking for the kind of food critic who leaves her victims in shreds and tatters, Marilyn Haggerty is not your gal. She is objective and fair. She looks for the positive while pointing out what needs improvement.

But you get a glimpse into the culture of a small Midwest community. There is a homogeneity to the restaurants she visits and a friendliness. She is often accompanied by her husband whom she refers to as CC (Constant Companion), which I think is sweet. He always orders the special.

I used this book as my right-before-bedtime book because it was so calming, but ultimately there was just a sameness to each entry that made me decide to stop.

Steve Peifer says

As I was mourning the death of Anthony Bourdain, I read the story of the woman who wrote a review of the new Olive Gardens in Grand Forks, ND and was brutally mocked on the internet. Somehow, Bourdain came to her defense and ended up editing and writing the forward of a collection of her reviews. This could of been a one trick pony book, but it is surprisingly compelling. Because ND is small, she finds out that the owner sunk every penny into a new restaurant and it brings a sadness I just wasn't expecting. And it made me that much sadder for Bourdain's passing.

Laura says

Marilyn Hagerty is the first to say she's not a reviewer or a food critic. Her Eatbeat column in the *Grand Forks Herald* is just that, a recounting of her culinary encounters in and around Grand Forks, North Dakota. She visits each restaurant a few times, usually with friends in tow. She doesn't hide who she is--in a town of 55,000, she probably couldn't--but she doesn't accept free meals, either.

Marilyn's writing is straightforward and factual. She lets you know her opinions about oversalted soups and sloppy coleslaw, but she doesn't pretend that these are anything more than her opinion. You taste the food with her tastebuds and see everything with her eyes.

It's easy to see why Internet snark police thought Marilyn's polite but unenthusiastic column on Grand Forks's first Olive Garden was hilarious. If you don't get that it's a personal experience column and not a review, it seems weird to devote ink to the Olive Garden. In context, near the end of these 128 chronologically arranged reviews, you can see that her writeup damns it with faint praise.

I was surprised that the frequently snippy Anthony Bourdain loved Marilyn's Eatbeat columns so. His introduction talks about watching the lutefisk and walleye gradually disappear from menus, and seeing chain restaurants such as Red Lobster and Ruby Tuesday overtake the mom-and-pop lunch spots. He seems to understand that the Eatbeat columns make a time-lapse movie of dining out in a Midwestern university town. He seems to respect them, and Marilyn, for that.

The form of the book disappointed me. I didn't expect the multiple-column newspaper layout to remain, but the articles feel sort of dumped into the book. Editorial notes follow some, but not all, of the articles. It took me a while to realized that the notes appear only after the last article about a given restaurant. The notes aren't consistent, either. Some have quotes from Marilyn, some give details about business closures, and some just say that the restaurant continues to operate or no longer operates in Grand Forks. It feels uneven.

The biggest disappointment for me was the lack of any kind of index or table of contents. I realize that few people will use this as a guidebook to eating in Grand Forks, and that's fine. But that inconsistency in the notes wouldn't have bugged me so much if it were explained in an editor's note, or if a TOC or index could clue me in that I'd see another article on the same restaurant later in the book. It doesn't seem like a serious treatment of a book that's billed as a historical document.

All in all, *Grand Forks: A History of American Dining in 128 Reviews* is a pleasant read and an interesting series of snapshots. It's nostalgic for small-town Midwesterners and an education for anyone who considers the Midwest a flyover zone.

Kalen says

** 1/2

Like many recent reviewers/readers, I picked this up after the death of Anthony Bourdain. I didn't know the book existed but it was the first one he published with his eponymous HarperCollins imprint and I remembered Hagerty's 2012 review of Olive Garden well. It went viral, with lots of derision, and Bourdain came to Hagerty's defense.

This book has some touching moments (the death of Hagerty's husband and the ND floods) and Hagerty's style is charming--the things she picks up on are some of the same things I pick up on, too--but over all the book gets bogged down in repetitiveness. How many reviews do you need of the same restaurant especially when they all basically say the same thing? Yes, these are newspaper columns put into book form (more on that later) but the collection could have been much better edited to pull only the best review (or maybe two) of Whitey's or Kon Nechi Wa's. You don't need four of them.

The subtitle on this one really over-promises. Sure, you can see the low- non-fat trend develop and wain and you can see an increasing interest in ethnic foods but the only context provided is in the all-too-short foreword written by Bourdain.

And the format of this book made it a bit uncomfortable to read. Yeah, these are restaurant reviews published originally in a newspaper. We get that. There was no need for the two-column layout which isn't at all comfortable for reading in book format for nearly 200 pages. It was a distraction and not an asset.

Probably my favorite part of the book was getting to the end to find out if the restaurant is still in business or not. I don't know why that struck me so much but some of these now-closed places sounded really great though it's unlikely I'll make it to Grand Forks anytime soon. Just 2 1/2 stars on this one--it was really a slow read for such a short book and I would have abandoned it about 2/3 of the way through but that always seems too far to get into a book to put it down unless I really hate it, which of course I didn't.

Sarah says

Haters to the left. Marilyn is a treasure.
