



Book Club Guide

Apron Strings

by Jan Wong

About the Author

Jan Wong is a third-generation Canadian who grew up in Montreal speaking English, some French and zero Chinese. In the summer of 1972, while majoring in Asian studies at McGill University, she traveled alone to the People's Republic of China. At 19, she talked her way into a spot at Peking University, becoming the first of two Westerners to study in China during the Cultural Revolution, a tale she recounts in her memoir, *Red China Blues, My Long March from Mao to Now*.

Jan soon became fluent in Mandarin as a result of being the one and only student of a humorless Communist Party official (whom she nicknamed Fu the Enforcer.) On Saturday afternoons, as part of Chairman Mao's Revolution-in-Education Movement, Jan also dug ditches, hauled pig manure and harvested wheat, shoulder to shoulder with her Chinese roommate, Scarlet.

Later, as a foreign correspondent based in Beijing for six years, Jan was an eyewitness to the 1989 massacre at Tiananmen Square. Named one of Time magazine's top ten books of 1996, *Red China Blues* remains banned in China.

Jan began her journalism career in 1979 as the first-ever news assistant for The New York Times bureau in Beijing. She reported on Democracy Wall, the beginnings of dissent in China and the underground disco movement. In 1981, after graduating with a master's degree from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, she became a staff reporter at The Gazette in Montreal and, later, The Boston Globe, The Wall Street Journal and The Globe and Mail.

She is a recipient of the George Polk Award in the U.S. for business reporting, a National Newspaper Award in Canada for foreign reporting, the New England Press Association Newswoman of the Year Award, the Globe and Mail's Stanley MacDowell Prize for Writing, the Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Silver Medal, a National Magazine Silver Award in Canada for column writing and the Daily Bread Food Bank Public Education Award in Toronto, among other honors.

Jan has degrees in history from McGill University and Peking University. She has taught journalism at Ryerson University in Toronto. In 2010, she was the Visiting Irving Chair in Journalism at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick. She currently divides her time between Toronto, where she is a columnist for Toronto Life magazine, and Fredericton, where she is a professor in journalism at St. Thomas University and a columnist for the Halifax Chronicle Herald, the largest independently owned newspaper in Canada.

Her other non-fiction books have been translated into many languages, including Swedish, Finnish, Dutch, Japanese, Romanian, Polish, French and Italian. They are:

- Jan Wong's China: Reports from a Not-So-Foreign Correspondent,
- Lunch With Jan Wong: Sweet and Sour Celebrity Interviews,
- Beijing Confidential: A Tale of Comrades Lost and Found, published in the U.S. as Comrades Lost and Found and in the U.K. as Chinese Whispers,
- Out of the Blue: a Memoir of Workplace Depression, Recovery, Redemption and, Yes, Happiness.

Her latest book, *Apron Strings: Navigating Food and Family in France, Italy, and China*, was published on September 12, 2017.

Retrieved from: <https://www.janwong.ca/bio.html>

About the Book

Jan Wong knows food is better when shared, so when she set out to write a book about home cooking in France, Italy, and China, she asked her 22-year-old son, Sam, to join her. While he wasn't keen on spending excessive time with his mom, he dreamed of becoming a chef. Ultimately, it was an opportunity he couldn't pass up.

On their journey, Jan and Sam live and cook with locals, seeing first-hand how globalization is changing food, families, and cultures. In southeast France, they move in with a family sheltering undocumented migrants. From Bernadette, the housekeeper, they learn classic French family fare such as blanquette de veau. In a hamlet in the heart of Italy's Slow Food country, the villagers teach them without fuss or fanfare how to make authentic spaghetti alle vongole and a proper risotto with leeks. In Shanghai, they home-cook firecracker chicken and scallion pancakes with the nouveaux riches and their migrant maids, who comprise one of the biggest demographic shifts in world history. Along the way, mother and son explore their sometimes-fraught relationship, uniting — and occasionally clashing — over their mutual love of cooking.

A memoir about family, an exploration of the globalization of food cultures, and a meditation on the complicated relationships between mothers and sons, *Apron Strings* is complex, unpredictable, and unexpectedly hilarious.

Retrieved from: <https://www.janwong.ca/apronstrings.html>

Discussion Questions

1. If your book offers a **cultural portrait**—of life in another country or region of your own country, start with questions a, b, and c ...

- a) What **observations** are made in the book?
Does the author examine economics and politics, family traditions, the arts, religious beliefs, language or food?
- b) Does the author **criticize or admire** the culture? Does he/she wish to preserve or change the way of life? Either way, what would be risked or gained?
- c) What is **different** from your own culture? What do you find most surprising, intriguing or difficult to understand?

2. What is the **central idea** discussed in the book? What issues or ideas does the author explore? Are they personal, sociological, global, political, economic, spiritual, medical, or scientific

3. Do the issues **affect your life**? How so—directly, on a daily basis, or more generally? Now or sometime in the future?

4. What **evidence** does the author use to support the book's ideas? Is the evidence convincing...definitive or...speculative? Does the author depend on personal opinion, observation, and assessment? Or is the evidence factual—based on science, statistics, historical documents, or quotations from (credible) experts?

5. What kind of **language** does the author use? Is it objective and dispassionate? Or passionate and earnest? Is it biased, inflammatory, sarcastic? Does the language help or undercut the author's premise?

6. What are the **implications** for the future? Are there long- or short-term consequences to the issues raised in the book? Are they positive or negative...affirming or frightening?

7. What **solutions** does the author propose? Are the author's recommendations concrete, sensible, doable? Who would implement those solutions?

8. How **controversial** are the issues raised in the book? Who is aligned on which sides of the issues? Where do you fall in that line-up?

9. Talk about **specific passages** that struck you as significant—or interesting, profound, amusing, illuminating, disturbing, sad...? What was memorable?

10. What have you **learned** after reading this book? Has it broadened your perspective about a difficult issue—personal or societal? Has it introduced you to a culture in another country...or an ethnic or regional culture in your own country?

Retrieved from: <https://www.litlovers.com/run-a-book-club/questions-for-nonfiction>

Author Interview

During the first few months of 2016, author, journalism professor and former Globe and Mail writer Jan Wong was living a gastronome's dream, travelling and eating her way through France, Italy and China — what she calls her favourite foodie countries. She went with her 22-year-old son Sam, a recent university graduate and aspiring chef, hoping to learn the tricks, techniques and rustic dishes of the “home cooks” they stayed with during their travels.

In the small southeastern French town of Alex, Wong and her son roomed with a family sheltering undocumented immigrants from Georgia, learning traditional fare from the family's housekeeper. In northwest Italy's Piedmont region, they learned spaghetti alle vongole and risotto al porro from the interconnected inhabitants in the small village of Repergo. In China, a country where Wong spent many years as a student and then reporter, they stayed in Shanghai, learning to make scallion pancakes and firecracker chicken from ill-treated migrant maids.

Wong captured the experience in her new book, *Apron Strings*, part travelogue, part cookbook, part commentary on the cultures she was immersed in for three months. She sat down with us to share a few of those tricks she picked up and what she discovered about the philosophy of eating in the countries she visited.

What most surprised you about mealtime in each country?

I couldn't believe how uniform dinner hour was in France and Italy. At 8 p.m., everything stops and everyone eats. It's sacrosanct. And it made me think, wouldn't it be great if we could do that too — if parents didn't have to microwave something frozen or go out for fast food in between shuffling their kids to soccer practice. China, on the other hand, was very chaotic, because the whole country is in economic upheaval. In the families I stayed with, the husbands were always out, busy with work, and there was such an obsession with the West — with things like chips, white bread and Starbucks.

In France, you learned to preserve an opened can of tomato paste with a thin layer of olive oil; in Italy you found that soaking clams in salt water cleaned them well enough to avoid scrubbing. What other good tips did you get from these home cooks?

Everywhere I cooked, kitchen space was at a premium. The Italians taught me a trick with plastic wrap: You just throw out the box, which is usually flimsy with a crappy cutter, and use your thumb to punch a hole. That way, you can always see how much is left [on the roll] and it saves you room. I also learned a trick if you're using parchment paper to line a round baking tin. Usually, you're told to cut it in a circle, but Mirella, the owner of a winery in Piedmont, cut her parchment in a square, wet it a little under the tap, put it in the pan, then poured the batter over it and smashed the pan on the table to make it settle. Once everything's cooked and you're pulling it out of the oven, it's really easy to use the corners to lift the cake out – you don't need to cut anything and it's very clean.

Who takes food most seriously?

The Italians, definitely. They really care about the provenance of their food, and not necessarily for environmental reasons — it's all about tradition. Everything we were eating and much of what we cooked with was either made by a family member or by some neighbour up the road. There's also real beauty in cucina povera (peasant cooking), which comes from a place of scarcity. It's not fussy food, but they've come up with the most delicious recipes based on nothing.

Besides the ability to spend time with him, what was the best part of having Sam there with you?

He was great about picking up the logic of the recipes — for example, telling me that soffritto in Italy was similar to mirepoix in France. But he was also my goodwill ambassador and in France and Italy, where the people we were staying with were happy that a young man was interested in cooking, because the younger generation is not cooking and the recipes are not being transmitted.

There's an anecdote in the book about the French maid Bernadette using what you describe as a "crappy" dinner fork for cooking, that she doesn't even have tongs. What did you learn from this?

It taught me that you don't need a lot to cook. In Italy it was the same thing. We were learning from working-class people in very small kitchens with very few gadgets. Really, if you want to cook, you don't need to spend \$300 on a pot, you can cook with any type of stove, it's not that hard. It was no-nonsense, and that was comforting.

What was the best meal you had in each country?

In France, it was the tagine chicken with lemon confit, which was delicious but also memorable because we only had four chicken legs and four thighs for eight people, and it really struck home how modestly people could eat and what portion sizes we should be eating. In Italy, we had the most amazing carbonara which broke all the rules — no cheese, no garlic, only two eggs for a group of people. I still make that one at home. In China, I just loved the scallion pancakes and firecracker chicken and spicy wings.

Is there anything you wish we could get in Canada?

Ingredient-wise, I'd love to get Italian pancetta made from Italian pigs. Fresh straw mushrooms in China were amazing. In France, we would get this fresh-pressed olive oil that just tasted completely different from what we get here. In Italy, some of our hosts also had this kitchen appliance called the Bimby, which is a chopper and blender, it heats food, there's temperature control and it's compact — it takes up very little real estate. It's also super sturdy and really easy to clean — you just put water in, it boils the water and then you dump it out. You can technically get one in Canada, but they cost almost \$2,000.

Your hosts in Italy used a very unique shortcut — Knorr flavour concentrate gels — in dishes like pasta e fagioli and risotto al porro. What did you make of that?

That shocked me, but I liked the honesty. There's not a lot of honesty in some cookbooks, they won't admit using these flavour punches. These home cooks were doing what they had to do to make delicious food.

Your section on China seemed to have more in the way of cultural observations than it did cooking. Was that expected?

I had no idea what to expect. We were staying with extremely wealthy people, and the only way we had access to them is because my friend there told them that Sam would be their personal, Western-style chef. But it was shocking how poorly they treated their maids. These were people that grew up under food rationing and now they diet regularly because materialism is so important to them.

What do you think Canadians can take away from how people eat in France, Italy and China?

Food is the glue that holds families together — it's not just fuel. We talk about how mealtimes are important, but as a culture, we need to understand that we can't schedule things in the way of the meal. I know it's hard, but if it's important to us, we need to make a collective change.

Retrieved from: <https://www.chatelaine.com/food/jan-wong-interview-book-apron-strings/>

Links and Other Resources

CBC Books article: <https://www.cbc.ca/books/why-jan-wong-deleted-the-word-delicious-from-her-food-travelogue-apron-strings-1.4285961>

The Agenda interview part 1:

<https://www.facebook.com/TheAgenda/videos/10155383221370047/>

The Agenda interview part 2:

<https://www.facebook.com/TheAgenda/videos/1910777885891211/>

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DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: