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Contact: Jessica Purcell  
Senior Publicist  
212-790-4267  
[jpurcell@wnorton.com](mailto:jpurcell@wnorton.com)

# WHITE TRUFFLES IN WINTER

*A Novel*

By **N. M. Kelby**

“Kelby captures the sensory pleasures of food and the complex role it plays in the lives of her characters. . . . Readers in search of an evocative and sensual read will be well satisfied.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Through rich description based on careful research, Kelby offers intriguing possibilities regarding the life of the great Escoffier and gives us a novel well worth reading.”

—*Library Journal*

“I was instantaneously drawn into this novel, and all of its exquisite writing about food. It also contains one of the more unique and affecting seduction scenes I have ever read, and for its uniqueness, utterly believable.”

—Pam Houston, author of *Cowboys Are My Weakness*

“Beautifully layered and lovingly detailed, *White Truffles in Winter* is a tale of extraordinary people entangled in a captivating love story. Filled with lush and decadent longing, this novel will dazzle the mind as well as the senses.”

—Diana Abu-Jaber, author of *Birds of Paradise*

“*White Truffles in Winter* is a seductive, voluptuous journey into the heart of French cuisine. I wanted only to linger longer at this luscious feast that brims with passion and yearning.”

—Lauren Belfer, *City of Light*

“When I give you this plate, I give you the nourishment that you need to continue to live and yet I also change how you see the world. I offer you a creation that allows you to see a single fresh carrot . . . that bespeaks not only its beauty but the unexpected possibilities of roots buried in the earth. . . . It becomes part of your very skin, hair and teeth. And so, when you address the plate, you must ask yourself where in this beauty is the knowledge that there is a God? Where is evidence of His love?”

With this speech, Auguste and Delphine Escoffier's complicated marriage begins, and Delphine quickly finds that she will never think of food in the same way again. Escoffier is, of course, the famed French chef Auguste Escoffier (1846–1935), who is credited with pioneering the modern dining experience, especially through the meals he prepared at his legendary restaurants at The Savoy and The Ritz. He is a man of striking contradictions—kind yet imperious, food-obsessed yet rarely hungry, professionally successful but financially unlucky. His new wife is the acclaimed, reserved, and fiercely independent poet and writer Delphine Daffis, whom he won in a billiards game from Delphine's cash-strapped father. Spanning from the 1880s to the 1930s, the beautiful and haunting story of Escoffier, Delphine, and their marriage—which was rumored to be crowded by the shadow of the larger-than-life actress Sarah Bernhardt—is imagined in the new novel **WHITE TRUFFLES IN WINTER** by N. M. Kelby [W. W. Norton & Company; November 7, 2011; \$24.95 hardcover].

As **WHITE TRUFFLES IN WINTER** opens, World War II is on the horizon. After spending most of their marriage apart, Escoffier and Delphine are once again living together, scraping by in their villa in Monte Carlo and surrounded by an extensive brood of visiting family members. Escoffier spends his days struggling to finish his latest book, while Delphine is quickly declining. She spends most of her time confined to a wheelchair, dependent on morphine, and obsessed with one thought—to make sure her husband creates a dish in her honor before she dies. Escoffier has made dishes for everyone from Queen Victoria to Bernhardt, but he has never made one for his wife. Delphine enlists the aid of the villa's new cook—a young, irritable girl named Sabine who more than resembles Escoffier's beloved Sarah Bernhardt—to help in her quest. Escoffier is no fool and plays cupid for the unsuspecting girl, who finds herself being tamed by both Monsieur and Madame Escoffier.

Escoffier attempts a memoir of his life, told through the wonderful dishes he has prepared, in order to stave off the growing pile of bills. He teaches Sabine how to cook for them, and she learns that the name “Escoffier” and his fame—if wielded with a liberal seasoning of chicanery—can still fill the kitchen with extravagant gifts of foods, even during wartime. Sabine does her best to push Escoffier into making a dish for Delphine, but his mind wanders backward in time with reminiscences of Delphine, Sarah, his children, and the meals—so many exquisite meals—that he has made along the way. As Escoffier notes, “When you reach a certain age, all you see are ghosts.” For Escoffier, even the ghosts are extraordinary: Estes, the American chef

and former slave, who showed him how to prepare fried chicken; Sarah Bernhardt, for whom he made special birthday meals of scrambled eggs and champagne; and Kaiser Wilhelm, who asked Escoffier to prepare a special dinner onboard his ship and made him privy to deadly state secrets.

All the while, the dish he cannot seem to create for Delphine looms over Escoffier. As the brilliant chef laments, “it is an art that combines the telling of impossible truths and the chemistry of memory that only cuisine can provide. He worries that “some dishes fall short of the profound love that a chef feels and that is insulting.” How is he to distill their long, passionate, exasperating, and bewitched love into a single work that can mimic the complex flavors of their marriage?

In order to explore these themes and bring to life the world of Escoffier, author N. M. Kelby plunged deeply into research about Escoffier, as well as Escoffier’s own cookbooks, letters, and memoir. But, as Kelby discovered, many of these works contradicted one another. She found that “the list of facts, and alleged facts, go on and on but what is left unsaid is often the most interesting part of any life.” Did Escoffier have an affair with Sarah Bernhardt as rumored? What was the truth of his marriage with Delphine? We will never know. But maybe the more important truth about Escoffier is what he can tell us about ourselves. As Kelby explains, “We all know that I did not write about the real man. The elegant savage found in these pages is who we all are when we address the plate. The magician, the priest, the dreamer, the artist—it is our most hungry self.”

Alive with grace and longing, **WHITE TRUFFLES IN WINTER** delivers a literary dish bursting with sensuality and wit. From what she calls “the bones of fact,” Kelby has spun an intriguing, romantic, and ultimately wondrous story of the brilliant man who made cuisine modern. As the Escoffier of this novel so wisely tells us, “Food is a thing of enchantment and to believe in enchantment, and to weave its spell, is a radical and necessary act. And so. Silently. Cook.”

**About the author:**

**N. M. Kelby** is the critically acclaimed author of *In the Company of Angels*, *Whale Season*, and the Florida Book Award–winning *A Travel Guide for Reckless Hearts*, among other works. She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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**AUTHOR: N. M. Kelly**

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