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**Cooking Up Clues: Culinary Sleuths and Crime Detection in Ovidia Yu's *Aunty Lee's Delights* and Ajay Chowdhury's *The Cook***

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**Abstract:** Beyond a vital element for survival, food serves as a semiotic tool that reveals social dynamics and cultural heritage. The culinary experience, a cardinal aspect in any culture has the power to transport us to forgotten memories bridging the chasm between past and present. Culinary mysteries are a nascent subgenre of cosy mysteries that coalesces crime and fiction in an intriguing way. Cuisine often sheds light on the characters' insights, psychological states and buried pasts in these novels. Amateur sleuths in contemporary fiction employ culinary skills for deduction and autonomy by combining flavours and facts to expose hidden truths. This paper analyses the intricacies of culinary spaces as sites of investigation and cultural expression in Ovidia Yu's *Aunty Lee's Delights* (2013) and Ajay Chowdhury's *The Cook* (2022). Ovidia Yu discusses a crime scenario in Singapore, where Aunty Lee uses her culinary expertise to unveil the murder and its hidden motives. On the other hand, Chowdhury's narrative revolves around the murder of a young woman investigated by a former police officer, Kamil Rahman, who works as a chef in an Indian restaurant in London. The paper examines the hybrid identities of protagonists as chefs and sleuths and how food functions as a narrative device, a tool of justice and a marker of identity. This study implements a qualitative approach centred on close reading of the novels and also demonstrates how the kitchen operates as a liminal space of both solace and confrontation that dismantles all forms of hierarchy.

**Keywords:** *food studies, culinary mysteries, sleuth, crime fiction, culture, identity*

“Eating,” says Hercule Poirot, “was not only a physical pleasure, it was also an intellectual search”  
– Agatha Christie, *Mrs. McGinty’s Dead* (1952)

**F**ood extends beyond sustenance; it functions as a semiotic device that marks cultural boundaries. It serves as a repository of cultural knowledge. Food was considered primarily as a neutral substance, but later, how food functions as a symbol was widely discussed in academic circles. Food is shaped by several cultural and social conventions that decide what is considered edible, meaningful and acceptable. Ostensibly, the simple acts of eating are peppered with convoluted and antithetical cultural meanings. Culinary practices act as a cultural signifier that demarcates social stratification. It encapsulates a palimpsest of meanings related to history, culture, race and social order. It encodes caste dynamics, class, ethnicity, gender norms, political hierarchies, racial stereotypes and also sanctifies religious rituals. Moreover, the smell and taste of food can bring a plethora of past memories into one’s psyche. It serves as both an emotional archive and a language of remembrance. It has emerged as a significant medium for articulating identities, both at the individual and collective levels. The aspect of food has long been disregarded by academia since the pleasures derived from olfaction and gustation were considered inferior traditionally, as they pertain to the inferior world of the body rather than the realm of the mind.

The emergence of food studies as an academic discipline gained momentum in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Warren Belasco, the editor of the journal, *Food, Culture and Society* introduced the interdisciplinary nature of the area, Food Studies in the 1990s. It got collaborated with the various disciplines like anthropology, psychology, nutrition, sociology, history etc. Ahead of its development as a distinct field of study, Roland Barthes in his renowned essay, *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* (1961), asserted that food is “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (21). He further exclaimed, “an entire world” (social environment) is present in and signified by food (23). Claude Levi Strauss’s essay “The Raw and the Cooked” in the collection *Mythologies* (1964) analysed how the “cooking of a society is a language” that reveals its social structure (28). Mary Douglas’s studies reflect the central role of food in maintaining social hierarchy and the process of meaning-making. In a similar vein, the French Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, also argued in *Distinction: A Social Judgement of Taste* (1979) that what and how we eat and taste reinforce social privilege and economic capital. The American anthropologist, Sidney Mintz’s, *Sweetness and Power* (1985) enabled the area of food studies to cross boundaries and scrutinized the interconnection between the production of a particular product and the issues of economics, taste and power. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik in their text, *Food and Culture: A Reader* (2008), examined the social, economic, gender, symbolic and political role of culinary tradition at the global level. Anita Mannur’s much-acclaimed work, *Culinary Fictions: Food*

*in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (2009) analysed how food in “the cultural imagination of diasporic populations, becomes one of the most viable and valuable sites” where “race is imagined and reinterpreted within the cultural arena, both to affirm and resist notions of home and belonging” (8). An eminent Indian scholar of Food Studies, Krishnendu Ray, focuses on immigrant cuisines and ethnic restaurants highlighting the role of globalisation and social power in constructing culinary values. Food plays a significant role in developing social relationships and is symbolic in religious rites and in maintaining cultural identities. The discipline of food studies examines the complex interconnections among food, its cultural implications and their effects on society. The paper analyses how the major protagonists exhibit the dual identities of chefs and sleuths and how food operates as a medium of narration, an instrument of justice and an indicator of cultural identity. Further, it also examines how the kitchen operates as a space in a state of flux of both solace and a locus of encounter that destabilises all modes of entrenched hierarchical differentiation.

‘Culinary mysteries’, a term proposed by Silvia Baučková (*Dining Room Detectives* 82) are a nascent subgenre of cosy mysteries that combines crime and fiction in an intriguing way. Culinary mysteries as a genre invited the readers’ attention in the 1990s by combining day-to-day real recipes into the main story. The detectives in these narratives ingeniously solved mysteries as well as cooked a variety of dishes. Amateur sleuths in these texts employ culinary skills for deduction and autonomy by combining flavours and facts to expose hidden truths. Cuisine often sheds light on the characters’ insights, psychological states and buried pasts in these novels. These books are also called cosy mysteries because murder happens “in an ordinary, domestic environment where food is an indispensable part” (Baučková, *The Flavour of Murder* 44) and most of them are “written in series” (Martynuska 123). Crime fictions are narratives centered around “criminal acts and especially on the investigation, either by an amateur or a professional detective, of a serious crime, generally a murder” (Abrams 85). *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* defines crime detection as “rational rather than active or intuitional, a method which fits with the unemotional presentation of the crime” (Priestman 78). As Kevin Burton Smith in his article ‘Murder on the Menu’ (2010) states, “right from the start there has been a curious link between food (and drink) and crime fiction”. Nieves Pascual Soler’s *A Critical Study of Female Culinary Detective Stories: Murder by Cookbook* (2009) highlights the nexus between cooking and the process of detection in contemporary culinary whodunits. She elaborates on how detective-cook identity is seamlessly constructed by this correlation that plays a decisive role in these narratives. Perna Chakravarty observes in her article, “The Culinary Space: Food as a Narrative Tool in Agatha Christie’s Detective Novels” (2022),

Food plays a crucial role in a mystery novel, frequently lending authenticity to the detective story and showing readers the world as it is, where people eat and drink much like readers do in

real life. It also features as a symbol of safety and security amidst the murderer's attempt to distort the order of society. Food can also feature in crime fiction as a narrative tool, as a measure to forward the plot, serving as a clue, a murder weapon or even as a technique in the investigation. (62)

Recent years have also seen some crime fiction writers proffer a central protagonist working within the food industry who has the competencies that are required for preparing a meal and tracking down a murderer (Franks). Culinary craftsmanship and criminal investigation require keen observation, patience and precision where seemingly trivial elements may ultimately prove decisive importance in the process. Both practices share a striking methodological resemblance characterised by experimentation, analytical inquiry and interpretation. As Miranda Carter notes,

Food, as inevitable as death, is the perfect digression in these books: it is the natural counter, a tangible weapon, against the disruption and chaos of murder and violence. As these investigators cook and eat they assert life, reason and thought. And though food is fallow time from the plot, the implication is that it is tied up with intelligence, cogitation and therefore the resolution of the story.

Published in 2013, in *Aunty Lee's Delights*, Ovidia Yu discusses a crime scenario in Singapore, where Aunty Lee uses her culinary expertise to unveil the murder and its hidden motives. It is a part of a crime fiction series followed by *Aunty Lee's Deadly Specials*, *Aunty Lee's Chilled Revenge*, and *Meddling and Murder*. Aunty Lee's Delights is a café in Binjai Park, Dunearn Road in Singapore owned by Rosie Gran, whom everyone fondly calls Aunty Lee. It has earned a reputation for authentic Peranakan cuisine, most notably, the achar and sambals that Aunty Lee had meticulously prepared and sold from her home for many years. Aunty Lee's Peranakan dishes reflect Singapore's multicultural identity and her role as a cultural custodian. Michelle T. King articulates that Peranakans are "creolized Chinese or Indians whose cuisine, language, and fashion were heavily influenced by Malay culture through intermarriage and cultural adaptation" (112). Their cuisine reflects the multi-cultural style where they "have adapted, localized, and integrated Malay cooking styles and local ingredients into their own cooking" (123). Yu describes the making of dishes like *Shiok Sambal*, *bowl of bubor cha cha*- a Malay dessert, homemade *nasi lemak*, a coconut-cream-coated rice dish *epok-epok*-a South East Asian snack, deep-fried *ikan kuning* etc., to portray her ethnic heritage. Regional culinary traditions serve as cultural repositories that configure as the emblematic representation of a nation and perpetuate its collective historical memory. As Psyche Williams-Forson elucidates, "the smell of familiar foods can instantly evoke a series of emotions and desires because food and food customs are carriers of identity, memory, and tradition" (207). When Aunty Lee brought breakfast that she had prepared for Senior Staff Sergeant Salim to the police station, its aroma evoked memories in him. "The *nasi lemak*

smelled temptingly of coconut, reminding him of how his late grandmother’s *nasi lemak* used to taste” (Yu 101). The scent of his favourite childhood meal forges an emotional connection with Auntie Lee and he recounts his childhood days with his grandmother. As she is an amateur detective, she harnesses food as a tool to elicit SS Salim’s assistance and trust in the process of investigation. The omniscient author augments her titular character’s innate talent by pointing out that Mrs. Lee “had a knack for preparing foods people swore tasted exactly as they remembered them from their distant childhoods” (137). Apart from being a narrative device, the food in the novel also emerges as a marker of identity, reflecting the central character’s cultural roots. Instead of being tethered to the domestic space of the kitchen and reinforcing traditional roles, the female protagonist, Auntie Lee deploys her culinary expertise into a performative medium of self-articulation and autonomy.

The author portrays a unique character trait of her major protagonist at the onset of the novel. She says, “Auntie Lee, with her knack for understanding people (through the way they eat, she said), had probably known Uncle Lee better than anyone else” (Yu 16). Yu describes Mrs. Lee’s nature as “nothing tickled Auntie Lee’s mental taste buds so much as a strange death” (176). She can analyse the nature of an individual by simply observing the way the person eats. Her stepson Mark articulates that: “From his long experience, ‘he knew when Auntie Lee served someone with what he thought of as her “special food face” on, it meant she wanted something from them. It was thanks to that food face (and lamb kebabs specially marinated in paprika, coriander, and cardamom) that Mark had told Auntie Lee and his father about the money problems he and Selina were then facing” (51). Auntie Lee is a food aficionado who knows how important it is not only to know your ingredients but also to know the people you are dealing with. She kept that in mind when trying to figure out “human recipes” (137). She serves her homemade chrysanthemum tea to Carla Saito, girlfriend of Marianne Peters and “the hot tea seemed to help” and Saito “started to answer Auntie Lee’s questions” (43). Here, the author emphasizes how Auntie Lee’s tea functions as a medium that gives emotional comfort and how it helps to unburden Saito’s unspoken anxieties. At this juncture, Franks earnestly states that, “working with cooks or crooks, or both, requires planning and people skills in addition to creative thinking, dedication, reliability, stamina and a certain willingness to take risks”. Auntie Lee’s cooking skills enable her to scrutinize people meticulously and she utilises her expertise to advance in the process of investigation. The novel accentuates how naturally the conjunction of cooking and murder occurs without any perceptible strain.

One of the remarkable features that sets the detective as distinct from the rest of the characters, “besides her/his ability to reconcile the contradictory elements of rational and intuitive, is her/his infallible sense of justice” (Baučeková, *Dining Room Detectives* 129). Here in the novel, Auntie Lee is determined to find the murderer of Laura Kwee and Marianne Peters as she feels responsible for them.

She voices strongly, “Because the two girls who died both came to eat in my restaurant. For me, that makes it personal. If they ate my cooking, they are my guests and they are my family” (Yu 102). She further claims, “I feel responsible for the people I feed. Once my food has gone into them and become part of them and their lives, I become part of their lives. In a way I love them” ...you say it’s not my business, but all hungry people are my business” (105). She compares “in life as in recipes, it was often the smallest pinch of contrasting flavor- the lightest splash of seasoning savored undetected- that made all the difference to a dish” (110).

Baučeková undertakes a deeper examination on the analogy between a detective story and a food recipe by adhering to a particular set of rules and meticulously chosen ingredients. She builds on Cawelti’s argument:

Another parallel between mystery and a recipe is that in a detective story, murder is not understood as sinful, immoral, violent, and horrible, but is instead, like a tasty dish, seen as a way to pleasure. And like food, a mystery brings its readers not only pleasure, but also suspense as they wait for the solution to be prepared and revealed, feeling first the anticipation and then the gratification when the finished product is presented and their curiosity sated. (*Dining Room Detectives* 85)

Aunty Lee finally finds the killer, Sam Ekkers, who disguises himself in the name of his dead uncle, Harry Sullivan and settles in Singapore. Laura Kwee was involved in the LifeGifters network that conducts reparative therapy to reprogram gay and lesbian couples such as Marianne Peters and Carla Saito, along with Joseph Cunningham and Otto Thio, to enforce heterosexuality. A heated argument ensues between Sam and Marianne, culminating in her death and later, Laura Kwee’s attempt to blackmail him made her the next victim. Aunty Lee initially gives the cunning murderer, Sam Ekkers a drugged tea and spits out the truth. He confesses his crime when Aunty Lee threatens him with her culinary expertise of making her delicious cuisine, pork curry. She indirectly threatens him ominously by lifting a chopper and expertly whacking the pale-skinned leg of the meat, stating that “if you want to know what human beings tastes like, all you have to do is eat pork...very sweet you and the pig are both red meat... most people cannot tell the difference whether they are eating pig meat or human meat” (Yu 161). The amateur sleuths in cosy mysteries undertakes criminal investigations simultaneously with their culinary occupation and their effectiveness in the “food industry” contributes a “quality of resourcefulness” that aids in “solving criminal mysteries” (Martynuska 126).

On the concluding pages of the novel, Yu provides an authentic recipe for “Aunty Lee’s Amazing Singapore Achar (easy home version)” with “sambal belachan, blue ginger, lemongrass, home-dried limes, and tamarind pulp” (Yu 179). Some authors of culinary mystery novels include a detailed description of recipes as an appendix to add reality to the story. The intricate description of

culinary scenes generates “a connection between readers and protagonists” (Henderson 60). The sharing of recipes, a ubiquitous practice in everyday life is frequently reproduced in fictional narratives to highlight how food transmits social and cultural knowledge. Hence, these cosy mysteries act as a shortened version of a cookbook that thrives in the food tourism market. Franks acknowledges that “the separation between food and fiction is further blurred by food tourism and how people strive to experience some of the foods found within fictional works at bars, cafes, and restaurants around the world or create such experiences in their homes using fiction-themed recipe books”.

Ajay Chowdhury’s *The Cook* (2022) is the second novel in the Kamil Rahman series, preceded by *The Waiter* and followed by *The Detective*, *The Invitation*, *The Spy*, *The Shadow* and *The Patriot*. Chowdhury’s narrative revolves around the murder of a young nursing student, Salma Ali, investigated by a former Indian police officer, Kamil Rahman, who works as a chef in an Indian restaurant in London. He works as a waiter and a professional cook in a restaurant, Tandoori Knights, owned by Anjoli, a Bengali woman.

Kamil describes his love interest Naila Alvi, a Pakistani nursing student in King’s College, London and his boss’s daughter Anjoli in terms of culinary references that evince how food practices have been deeply ingrained in his daily life.

Besides, the intelligent cardamom-green eyes with the laughter lines, Naila was tall with chai latte skin, hazelnut hair tumbling around her face and a wide strawberry red-mouth that always seemed on the edge of a smile. The polar opposite of Anjoli, who was petite with skin the colour of cappuccino (with an extra shot), rounded features, big chocolate manga eyes and plum lips pursed, always ready for an argument. I guess I didn’t have a ‘type’- other than that they were describable in food terms. (Chowdhury 19)

The narrative transforms into a culinary whodunit with the murder of Salma Ali, who was Naila’s classmate. The victims share a major connection with the restaurant, since they are acquaintances who had either dined there or consumed food provided by Kamil and Anjoli as part of their social work. When Anjoli says to Kamil, “This was the last place she came to before she died- we owe it to her” (44), he promptly decides to find the killer and subsequently, the other two murders also occur in their residential area. Kamil utters to Naila- “Order from the chaos, that’s what I create. Whether it’s solving a crime from random clues, cooking a delicious dish with spinach, paneer and onions or setting the table, my calling is to create clarity and fight the forces of chaos” (88). He plans to retrieve more information about the murders by inviting his friend and a sergeant in the Kolkata Police who now works in the Metropolitan Police Service in London. As Baučková avers, “investigators often make use of the familiarity of the local pub or inn and are able to extract useful information and get to know local gossip and any number of guilty secrets” (*Dining Room Detectives*

124). Likewise, Kamil also declares, “Maybe, I’ll get Tahir over for lunch to find out what else he knows. A taste of my butter chicken and he’ll be chaputty in my hands” (Chowdhury 148). The act of dining together at his restaurant, Tandoori Knights provides an opportunity for Kamil to transform the space into a site of disclosure where seemingly mundane conversation is exchanged and pivotal information relevant to the case is revealed. Finally, he solves the case by finding the culprits using his ability to discern truth from lies. Kamil reflects that “I’d enjoyed honing my observational skills on our diners” (89), and this sensory awareness extensively aided him in identifying the real killer, Dr Liam Mackenzie. As Baučėková succinctly claims, “Food and detective fiction share a number of characteristics: they both rely to a great extent on ritualization, both are produced following a formula, and both are based on the inevitable interconnection of life and death” (*The Flavour of Murder* 44). Dr. Mackenzie, Senior Lecturer in Adult Nursing, who was the tutor of Salma and Naila, deploys the beverage, a bottle of gin as a weapon to assassinate homeless people and thereby eulogises that he reduces their sufferings with the assistance of Naila. Here, food serves as a murder weapon to eradicate the innocent lives in the city. Moreover, a sense of justice prevails in Kamil, unlike other investigators and Anjali applauds his moral integrity. She opines, “the difference between you and Tahir is you care. About the victim. About people around them. Tahir will just want to solve the case and make his name” (Chowdhury 44).

Food serves as a cultural archive that carries the memory of the soil into our present-day life (Barthes 24). The temporal boundary between the past and present collides when the familiar scent of food emerges from our childhood days. For Brad Kessler, “meals are magnets, they draw people together. They also serve as memory triggers, reminding characters of the past, and transporting them to another time through the memory of a similar previous sensory experience” (153). In the initial pages of the novel, Chowdhury introduces his protagonist, Kamil through the memory of his childhood with his family’s cook, Suresh. When Kamil reminisces,

They say your most profound memories are anchored in sensory experience. For me, it was the shocking crackle and explosive smack of aromatics that made me salivate and choked my lungs with savoury smoke as, with deceptive simplicity, Suresh added a dash of tiny black seeds, then a spoonful of red powder, followed by a pinch of something orange to the pot. It’s one of the few childhood memories. (Chowdhury 14)

Along with the criminal investigation, he also finds pleasure in cooking and serving Indian cuisines such as kababs, samosas, rogan josh, biryani, tandoori chicken, paneer tikka, Malabar prawn masala and harra murgh to his customers and experiences a sense of belonging to his native land. Williams-Forson, citing Brinda Mehta, argues that for many migrants, the smell of familiar foods encodes “an entire semiotic system of political, cultural, and social significations” (qtd. in Williams-

Forson 210). “The crackling aroma of fried cinnamon, cloves, bay leaves” pervades Kamil’s senses and he feels nostalgic for his ancestral home, “a village surrounded by lush emerald fields in Bengal” (Chowdhury 299).

In keeping with other culinary mysteries in the subgenre, recipes have been interspersed throughout the story. Rather than placing it at the end of the narrative, Chowdhury has integrated recipes with detailed ingredient lists and guidelines for cooking within the main plot of the novel. He incorporates the cooking of mackerel in accordance with Bengali cooking practice, “cooked in mustard oil with sweet potatoes, the penultimate dish was wild mushrooms sautéed with Indian garam masala, and mishti doi, a sweet, unctuous dessert with the consistency of condensed milk” (Chowdhury 295). Gitanjali Shahani, drawing on Carolyn Daniel, contends that “food descriptions in fiction, like menus in restaurants and television cookery programs, produce visceral pleasure, a pleasure which notably involves both intellect and material body working in synaesthetic communion” (qtd. in Shahani 6). Kamil’s passion for preparing and experimenting with Bengali cuisine is explicitly visible when he says, “now I could enjoy cooking, the creativity of inventing new combinations of heat, salt, fat and acid to transform raw meat, vegetables, spices and herbs into something that hadn’t existed ten minutes ago and would cease to exist ten minutes from now. For me it was a deep dive into mindfulness, taking me out of my head and into pure creativity” (Chowdhury 298).

Thus, Chowdhury, in his gastronomic whodunit *The Cook*, dismantles the traditional culinary mystery archetype where the story revolves around female amateur detectives, while his narrative concentrates on the male investigator cum cook. As a former detective, Kamil navigates the intricate social webs of London’s culinary world mediated through culinary sensibility and investigative acumen. Moreover, the absence of explicit violence and the mystery structured around culinary practices makes the narrative more palatable to readers.

The kitchen in *Aunty Lee’s Delights* and *The Cook* acts as a liminal site of comfort and conflict that decides the trajectory of the entire narratives. It functions as a subversive realm of agency and an arena of surveillance and storytelling. In these novels, the kitchen emerges as a threshold where cooks transform into detectives and conduct their interrogation. It is the locus area where the concealed truth gets unfolded gradually, rather than being an inert service counter in dining venues. The kitchen turns out to be “a theatrical and performative space and “provides the clues that will enable” the detection of crime (Michelis 37-38). Aunty Lee “called her kitchen her laboratory for DIY-CSI (Do-It-Yourself Crime Scene Investigation), the television in there testifying to her two passions, for food and news” (Yu 11). Whereas Kamil expresses that “I’d convinced myself that cooking in the TK kitchen was my career path to nirvana” (Chowdhury 228). Baučeková extols that “kitchen sounds, smells, and sights can have a calming effect on characters who are afraid or under stress” (*The Flavour of Murder* 37). In

*The Cook*, it is the place where Kamil gets access to the confidential information related to the case from Tahir and questions Ziad Aziz, Salma's boyfriend. Likewise, in *Aunty Lee's Delights*, Aunty Lee persuades Salim to disclose the covert information and confronts Sam Ekkers to confess his heinous crimes. Hence, these culinary detectives transform the kitchen from a place of conviviality into an area of examination and make their hospitality and culinary expertise to gain insights. The kitchen becomes a political space and cooking emerges as an act of assertion in these novels. The daily domestic "skills and experiences, suggest the culinary mystery, apply to the world beyond the kitchen, serving as analogues to and practice for the art of crime detection" (Kalikoff 74).

Food functions as one of the pivotal cultural signifiers that shape individual identities and their perceptions of the world. Cooking practices serve as a means to safeguard the richness and diversity of local traditional cultural practices. Crime detection and cooking exhibit a similar pattern where experimentation, intuition, analytical reasoning, patience and acute attention to detail are needed. Similar to a detective who deduces from a set of clues and reconstructs events, a culinary practitioner also concocts a delicious dish from a sequence of techniques and diverse ingredients. In Ovidia Yu's *Aunty Lee's Delights* and Ajay Chowdhury's *The Cook*, both protagonists epitomise a hybrid identity as 'culinary sleuths' traversing seamlessly between the kitchen and the investigative domain. Besides being food connoisseurs, they are adept investigators with their art of deduction, calibrate the interaction with the people around them and unmask the perpetrators. They employ the kitchen as a space of interrogation, ethical reflection and cultural expression. Moreover, these novels incorporate a detailed description of recipes into the narrative and thus make novels analogous to cookbooks, thereby establishing a real-life connection between major characters and the audience. The study contributes to ongoing scholarship in food and crime studies by demonstrating how the cook-detective merges nurturing and sleuthing roles, breaking the traditional detective archetype.

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