



Counter Culture: The American Coffee Shop Waitress

Candacy A. Taylor

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"Career waitresses do more than just serve food. They are part psychiatrist, part grandmother, part friend, and they serve every walk of American life: from the retired and the widowed, to the wounded and the lonely, and from the working class to the wealthy. The classic diner waitress is an icon of American culture. . . This book takes a moment to honor and recognize waitresses' contribution to our communities. Doing this project has helped me to redefine my perspective on life, work, and happiness. It has made me reevaluate the myth of the American dream that says you need to have an 'important' job to be happy."?from Counter Culture

In large cities and small towns across the country, the best diners and coffee shops are more than just restaurants: they are neighborhood institutions that bring together communities. From the Gold 'N Silver Inn in Reno, Nevada to the U.S.A. Country Diner in Windsor, New Jersey, these special places are not defined by their menus or décor, but by the waitresses who have establish bonds with their customers and their communities over years-and sometimes decades-of service. Counter Culture is a window into the lives of career waitresses who have worked in diners and coffee shops for up to sixty years. Since 2001, Candacy A. Taylor (a former waitress herself) has traveled more than 26,000 miles throughout the United States collecting stories of these "lifers," as many waitresses aged fifty or over playfully call themselves. She interviewed fifty-seven waitresses in thirty-eight towns and cities. Their compelling stories are complemented and enhanced by Taylor's striking color photographs of the waitresses at work. Taylor expected that the waitresses she'd meet would feel overworked and underappreciated, but was surprised and delighted to find that the opposite was true. The proud, capable waitresses Taylor interviewed loved their jobs and, even if given the opportunity, "wouldn't do anything else." Nearly all the waitresses said that the physical labor of waitressing helped them to age more gracefully and that the daily contact with customers and coworkers kept them socially engaged. Lifers generally make more money from serving regular customers with whom they forge bonds over decades and their seniority earns them respect from their coworkers and managers. Taylor's sensitive and respectful portrayal of career waitresses who have turned their jobs into a rewarding lifetime pursuit turns Counter Culture into an invaluable portrait of the continued importance of community in our changing society.

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