

Culinary Capers

Linda Wiken launches new series

Suspended Sentences

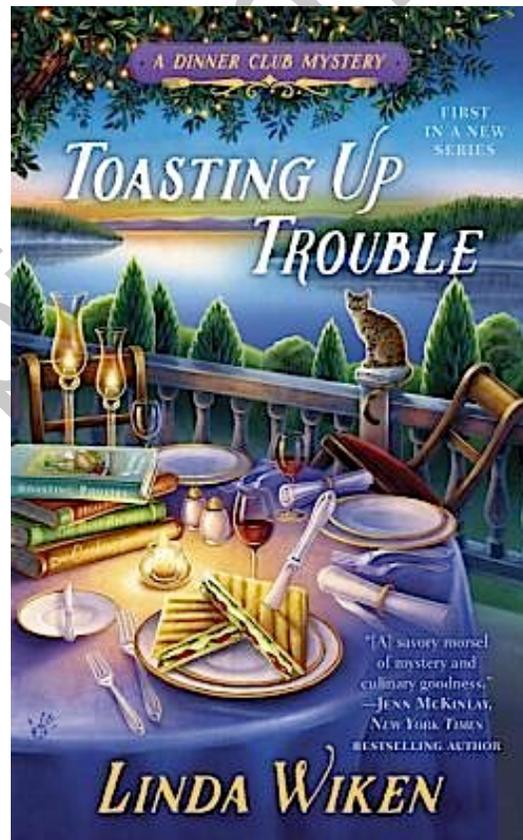
by Jim Napier

Christmas might be over, but winter is only beginning. Time for comfort food and good friends, and perfect for curling up with a good book. Fortunately for lovers of crime fiction, Ottawa's own Linda Wiken has just launched a new series of foodie cozies, starting with *Toasting Up Trouble*; and like savory dishes themselves, it's something to look forward to.

J. J. Tanner has just joined a longtime friend in opening a new venture called Make It Happen. It's an event-planning business located on Lake Champlain in Burlington, Vermont, and her first job is to prepare for Angelica Portovino, an Italian young woman celebrating her twenty-first birthday, and the daughter of Lorenzo Portovino, the CEO of the largest hi-tech business in Vermont.

J. J. has selected local chef Antonio Marcotti (and owner of the Bella Luna restaurant) to cater the event. Chef Marcotti has an outsized ego, a trait not unknown among people in his profession. When J. J. meets with him to plan the menu, he insists on exotic foodstuffs, such as a rare fungi at fifty-five dollars a portion, that would exceed J. J.'s budget for the event. They butt heads, but J. J. holds her ground and vetoes some of the chef's

choices. The meeting ends when Marcotti turns on his heels and walks out.



When the appointed day arrives everything goes perfectly—until, that is, J. J. discovers that Chef Marcotti has stuck to his original menu, including the outrageously-priced mushrooms. She is incensed, and confronts him as the event winds down, when most everyone has left. She tells Marcotti that he violated

their agreement, and she will not pay the difference. Marcotti points out that it's in their contract—added, of course, by him. He says it's her word against his, and asks, haughtily, who people would believe, the well-established restaurateur or a young woman just starting out in her business? J. J. storms away, determined to resolve the conflict later.

But when she returns to the Portovino estate the next morning J. J. finds two police cruisers blocking the entrance. Chef Marcotti, it seems, has been stabbed to death, and J. J. was the last person seen talking with him.

No self-respecting plot would end there, of course, and before it is

ended readers will be treated to a surprisingly large list of suspects, including a local bistro owner with ties to the victim that go back to Italy, a mistress, and a jealous wife. Add to this a neighbor who's a retired cop, a PI, and a high-powered lawyer, and you have a satisfying tale with all the key ingredients: a dislikeable victim, an engaging suspect, a sub-plot involving J. J.'s event-planning business, and a supporting cast of red herrings and others, all showcased by the culinary theme. Linda Wiken has given us an entertaining and insightful take on the, er, dog-eat-dog world of culinary mysteries.

Jim Napier is a professional crime-fiction reviewer based in Canada. Since 2005 his book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian newspapers and on multiple websites, and his own novel is scheduled to appear in the Spring. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

