

The School of Essential Ingredients

Book Club Discussion Questions

- 1) When Claire first walks into Lillian's, she reflects: "When was the last time she had been someplace where nobody knew who she was?" Is the anonymity of the kitchen a lure for Lillian's students?
- 2) How did you respond to the story of Lillian's upbringing? Would Lillian have been better off with a more traditional home life, like those of her school friends? Do you agree with Abuelita's statement that "sometimes our greatest gifts grow from what we're not given"?
- 3) Besides scenes from her childhood, the author discloses very little about Lillian. Why do you think she did this? How would the book be different if we knew more about Lillian's day-to-day life?
- 4) As a general rule, Lillian doesn't give her students recipes. Why do you think she does this? What are the pros and cons of this approach to cooking?
- 5) Did Helen do the right thing by telling Carl about her affair? How would their marriage — and Helen and Carl themselves — have evolved had he never learned the truth?
- 6) Each of the character's stories centers on a dish or ingredient which has a profound affect upon how they see themselves or the world. What connections do you see between Claire and the crabs? Between Chloe and tortillas? Tom and the pasta sauce?
- 7) Although we only see Charlie, Tom's wife, in flashback, she seems to share Lillian's love of essential ingredients. What do you make of Charlie's statement that "We are all just ingredients. What matters is the grace with which you cook the meal"?
- 8) Chloe observes that Thanksgiving at her house is "about everyone being the same and if you're not, eating enough so you won't notice." Is this something that our culture buys into in a larger sense? How does Lillian's approach to food fly in the face of this idea?
- 9) Isaac says to Isabelle that he thinks "we are each a ladder and a chair for the other." What do you think he means? Are there people in your life who are or have been that for you?
- 10) Lillian tells the class that "A holiday is a lot like a kitchen. What's important is what comes out of it." In what way do the kitchens in this book — Lillian's childhood kitchen, the greasy spoon where Tom meets Charlie, the kitchen that Antonia saves from demolition — represent different celebrations of life? Is there a kitchen in your life that you associate with a particular celebration or emotional milestone?

11) At the end of the novel, Lillian reflects that: “She saw how connected [the students’] lives had become and would remain. Where did a teacher fit in the picture, she wondered, when there was no longer a class?” What do you think happens to Lillian once her class is disbanded? What do you imagine happens to the other characters’ lives after the book ends?

12) What would be your essential ingredients?