

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When Claire first walks into Lillian's, she reflects: "When was the last time she had been someplace where no one 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 are 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 an ingredi-

ent that has a profound effect 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're 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 chair and a ladder 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 does happen to Lillian once her class is disbanded? Do you feel that each character's story is resolved? What do you imagine happens in these characters' lives after the book ends?
12. What would be *your* essential ingredients?

A CONVERSATION  
*with*  
ERICA BAUERMEISTER

***What led you to write this book?***

In 1999, my family had just returned to Seattle after spending two years in northern Italy. I found that I missed the food and being around people who celebrated even the most simple meals. So, I took a cooking class. The first night, we killed crabs. I'm the kind of person who takes spiders outside when I find them in my house, and it was a deeply unsettling experience. I had an image of a young mother, Claire, and wondered what effect it might have on her to kill something. In the end, her story wasn't at all what I expected. And then I thought about all the different characters you could have in a class, and about which foods would affect each one—revive a memory, create an epiphany, change the direction of a life—and that's where the book came from.

***How are food and cooking connected to the way we live our whole lives, not just the time we spend in the kitchen or at the table?***

The act of cooking provides us with an opportunity to slow

down, to focus on our senses rather than the speed of our world. I think we all want that, miss that, in our everyday lives. The people I know who pay attention to those things simply seem to be happier and more fulfilled, in the kitchen and out of it.

My children were incredibly lucky, in that they were seven and ten when we moved to Italy and they learned that lesson early. They are both dedicated foodies and truly creative cooks. My son just went to college and he inherited my college blender. The funny thing is, he took it because he wanted to be able to make pesto—a far cry from the margaritas and protein shakes it made in the early 1980s.

***If you were to make a romantic meal for a cold winter night, what would it be?***

My favorite dish is a ragu sauce with Italian sausage and hamburger, crushed tomatoes, onions, carrots, red pepper flakes, and white wine. Simple—and the white wine is a surprise every time. If you are cooking it for someone before they arrive, the smell that greets him or her when you open the door is amazing, so full of love. And if you are making it with someone, it can be all about trading tasks and doing the whole kitchen ballet, which can be utterly sensual.

But actually, the most romantic dinner I ever had was in college, when my not-yet husband took me to Griffith Park in Los Angeles and made fondue over a pot of Sterno (and yes, that part of the book is a wink in his direction).

***Do you believe in recipes, or is it enough just to know food and fundamental techniques?***

I think cooking is a language, and like all languages, it's easiest to learn early—although I am proof that it is possible to learn later in life. The women I met in Italy all had learned cooking as children from their mothers. They approached ingredients as parts of a con-

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versation; they knew how each ingredient talked to the others and they didn't want a recipe to tell them how much of one thing or another to add. They simply listened to the food. And while I think that recipes can be very helpful—particularly in baking, where amounts need to be fairly specific—I think that if we pay too much attention to recipes, we can lose track of our relationship with the ingredients.

If I am making a dish I have no experience with, I love to go on the Internet and find six different recipes for it. I particularly like Epicurious.com, where people comment on how they have altered the recipes. I take note of the ingredients, think about which ones sound intriguing, what I might add or subtract, and then I play.

***There's been a movement in recent years toward using local and organic food. Where should people look for the best and least expensive local and organic produce in their own areas?***

I think there is nothing more inspiring for a cook than a farmer's market, and we're lucky in Seattle to have many of them. I love walking along the stalls at the end of summer and stopping to eat a sample slice of peach that just stops you with its sweetness, makes you wonder why all life can't be that astonishingly full. I am also an advocate of the organic-food companies and the local farms that will deliver a box of produce to you on a weekly basis. You never quite know what you are going to get, only that it is going to be fresh and organic—which I think brings out a lot of creativity in cooks.

***You had two good friends who died of cancer as you wrote this book. Also, your father died of a neurological disease. How did these experiences influence your story?***

In 2006, two dear friends of mine were dying, and my father was

failing from a disease related to Parkinson's. There is a circle that surrounds people who are dying, and to be inside that circle is a beautiful and horrible honor—as the saying goes, there is no time for superficiality. My friend Karin asked to read something that I had written, and I gave her a manuscript for another project I was working on. One day we went out to lunch after her treatment, and she looked at me—all beautiful and turbaned—and said, “I think you should write something more from your heart.”

After years of illness, within the space of four months, Karin, Heidi, and my father died. I turned to the cooking stories, which I had worked on for years but had never finished a single one, and I wrote. I finished Tom's story first. Neither Karin nor Heidi are Charlie, Tom's wife in the book who dies of cancer. I had written most of Tom's story years before either Heidi or Karin were diagnosed, an irony that doesn't escape me. But the end of Tom's story became a place to put the pain of losing them. And being able to finish that story was a gift—because after I knew I could finish one story, the rest fell into place. So, in many ways, this is Karin and Heidi's book.

It is also my father's book. I grew up with a brilliant man, an engineer and musician who loved me but rarely knew how to show it. The irony of my father's illness was that it included a dementia that made him, little by little, less able to use his astonishing mind, and he began to live more from his heart. I learned a lot about dignity and empathy and forgiveness being with my father as he slid into death, and in the process, it profoundly changed the book I was writing.

***This is your first novel, although you've written other books about literature. How was the process of writing fiction different for you?***

I remember once speaking with an author who had made a

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comment about her characters in her presentation—how they talked to her and told her what to do, etc. I was skeptical and said so. I declared that no characters had ever talked to me. She just looked at me and smiled this small smile and said, “Maybe you aren’t listening.”

So I decided to listen. Carl was the first character who appeared in my imagination, a man whose wife has had an affair, but who doesn’t want to end his marriage. He was such a wonderful man and I wanted to do him justice; I wanted people to realize that his decision to stay in his marriage was something complicated and loving, rather than a lack of will. It wasn’t until six months later that I had a dream about his wife, and I realized that she had actually been planning on leaving him when she sat down at that kitchen table, but had changed her mind at the last moment—and that that decision, too, was complicated and loving, and gave their story a complexity I didn’t know it had until then.

Writing Helen’s story made me realize how powerful the concept of interconnected stories can be, allowing the reader to delve deeply into each character, and to be, in the end, the only person who truly knows all the connections between them.

### ***When did you know you wanted to be a writer? What experiences moved you in that direction?***

I have always wanted to write, but I realized what I wanted to write when I read Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing” in college (and I doubt very much I am alone in that experience). I wanted to write books that took what many considered to be unimportant bits of life and reminded people of their beauty—but the only other thing I knew for certain back in college was that I wasn’t grown up enough yet to do that.

So I got a Ph.D. in literature and wrote *500 Great Books by Women* and *Let’s Hear It for the Girls*. In the process, I read, liter-

ally, thousands of books—good and bad—which is probably one of the best educations a writer can have. I still wrote, but thankfully, that material wasn't published. I taught. I had children.

It's been thirty years since I first read Tillie Olsen. I still believe—even more so now—that paying attention to the small, unimportant bits of life is one of the most important things human beings can do. And I believe that literature that takes those things and looks at them with compassion has the ability to feed people's souls—and that that is a goal worth having.

### ***What do you hope readers take away from The School of Essential Ingredients?***

I always love it when a reader says, “Now I'm going to go home and cook my wife a real dinner” and you just know what that dinner will turn into. But perhaps my favorite response was from an American reader living in a small town in Mexico. She volunteers in a shelter for street kids, cooking them lunch once a week. She said that even though the kids were obviously hungry, they wouldn't always eat what she prepared for them, especially if it wasn't what they knew. She wrote that after she read Isabelle's story in the novel, she cooked a real Mexican pork stew and that the kids ate every bite and she got eighty-three hugs.

In the end, what I hope people take away from my book is that cooking can be a sensual experience that slows down time, but that cooking is also about thinking about other people. When we really cook for other people, we are seeing them—who they are, what will make them happy, excite or comfort them. And when we eat something that has been prepared, beautifully and especially for us, we feel loved, taken care of, seen.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erica Bauermeister's love of slow food and slow life was instilled by her two years living in northern Italy with her husband and children. She has taught literature and writing at the University of Washington and is coauthor of *500 Great Books by Women: A Reader's Guide* and *Let's Hear It for the Girls: 375 Great Books for Readers 2–14*. She currently lives in Seattle with her family. *The School of Essential Ingredients* is her first novel.

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# THE SCHOOL OF ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

*a delectable first novel by*

ERICA BAUERMEISTER

A lesson in cake-making leads to reflections on a marriage; tortillas teach a girl to believe in herself; a man learns about love while creating tiramisù. *The School of Essential Ingredients* follows a cooking class that meets in Lillian's restaurant kitchen. Over the course of eight months, the lives of the eight students and their teacher mingle and intertwine, brought together by the revealing, sensual, and comforting nature of what can be created in a kitchen.

"Fans of Maeve Binchy and Laura Esquivel are going to fall in love with Erica Bauermeister's beautiful story. I know I have. *The School of Essential Ingredients* is exquisitely written and heartbreakingly delicious. It's a luscious slice of life . . . and you will enjoy every bite."

—SARAH ADDISON ALLEN, *NEW YORK TIMES*—BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF *GARDEN SPELLS* AND *THE SUGAR QUEEN*

"In this remarkable debut, Bauermeister creates a captivating world where the pleasures and particulars of sophisticated food come to mean much more than simple epicurean indulgence. . . . Delivering memorable story lines and characters while seducing the senses, Bauermeister's tale of food and hope is certain to satisfy."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

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