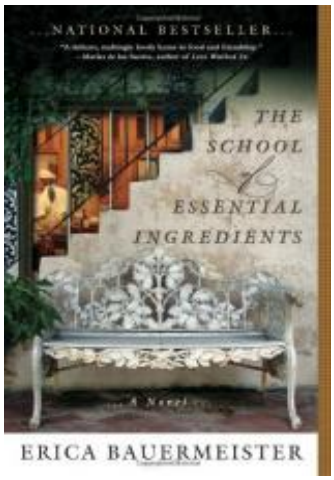
ReadingGroupGuides
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The School of Essential Ingredients

by Erica Bauermeister



About the Book

Once a month on Monday night, eight students gather in Lillian?s restaurant for a cooking class. Among them is Claire, a young woman coming to terms with her new identity as a mother; Tom, a lawyer whose life has been overturned by loss; Antonia, an Italian kitchen designer adapting to life in America; and Carl and Helen, a long-married couple whose union contains surprises the rest of the class would never suspect.

The students have come to learn the art behind Lillian?s soulful dishes, but it soon becomes clear that each seeks a recipe for something beyond the kitchen. And one by one they are transformed by the aromas, flavors, and textures of what they create?

Discussion Guide

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 ingredient 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?

Author Bio

Erica Bauermeister is the author of NO TWO PERSONS, THE SCENT KEEPER, THE SCHOOL OF ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS, JOY FOR BEGINNERS and THE LOST ART OF MIXING. She is also the co-author of nonfiction works 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 has a PhD in literature from the University of Washington, and has taught there and at Antioch University. She is a founding member of the Seattle7Writers and currently lives in Port Townsend, Washington.

Critical Praise

?THE SCHOOL OF ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS is a delicate, meltingly lovely hymn to food and friendship. Lillian's kitchen, full of buttery light and gorgeous smells, is a place where the world works the way it should. You'll want to tuck yourself into one warm corner of it and stay all day.?
?Marisa de los Santos, author of LOVE WALKED IN and BELONG TO ME

?The perfect recipe for escaping from life?s stresses, from savoring the delicious ingredients of Lillian?s recipes to the calm and thoughtful rhythm of Erica Bauermeister?s luminous prose.?
?Kate Jacobs, author of THE FRIDAY NIGHT KNITTING CLUB

?Fans of Maeve Binchy and Laura Esquirel 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 SPELLSand THE SUGAR QUEEN

?SCHOOL is a tale where strangers unite over food, each rediscovering their own essence via cooking?s wonders and pleasures?. Bauermeister manages to keep them fresh and their stories enticing though a series of achingly real vignettes and devastating flashbacks. And her cooking descriptions (fresh crab, handmade tortillas, luscious fondue, pasta sauce simmered for hours, a to-die-for tiramisu) will compel readers to hit the farmers market and run for the kitchen.?
?*The Seattle Times*

?Food Network fans will devour this first novel about a whimsical cooking school run by a gentle chef with a fierce passion for food.?
?*People*

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