

# **The Making of a Chef: Mastering Heat at the Culinary Institute of America Study Guide**

**The Making of a Chef: Mastering Heat at the Culinary Institute of America by Michael Ruhlman**

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# Plot Summary

The novel is a biographical account of Ruhlman, the author and narrator and his quest to learn how to become a chef through the Culinary Institute of America school of training. One of the top cooking schools in the country, the Culinary Institute of America, otherwise known as the CIA, has produced some of the world's greatest chefs and Ruhlman's account details the intense process that is required of anyone who wants to become a graduate of their school.

A writer, Ruhlman moves his wife (a photographer with paying clients) and young daughter from Cleveland Ohio to New York to the CIA setting. It is his goal to write an unbiased account of what happens when a person decides to enroll in one of the most influential cooking schools in the country.

Initially, Ruhlman details the steps of learning how to make a good brown stock. To the average layman, a brown stock is nothing short of boring and dull. To a great chef, however, the brown stock is the very foundation on which numerous classic and impressive dishes are created. In this first class, he learns how to make a superior mise en place and other foundational pieces that will lead him to be a better cook.

Essentially, Ruhlman sees himself as a "writer in a cooking school" versus a "chef that writes." However, this perception changes after a lecture from Chef Pardus. Although there is a blizzard outside, Chef Pardus expects everyone to be there and tells Ruhlman he is not cut from the same cloth as the rest of the future chefs in the room. This remark infuriates Ruhlman and he sets out in the snow to drive to class. He makes it there and afterwards, he feels something has changed inside him. Now, he is fully committed to becoming a chef and graduate of the CIA; he wants to be a chef who just happens to also be able to write.

Ruhlman continues on with his studies at the CIA and occasionally, he will encounter other chefs who have heard about the "Blizzard incident" and know that he is a writer. Nevertheless, as Ruhlman completes each session course—including American Bounty, Oriental, waiting tables at the St. Andrew's Cafe and working the grill station in the St. Andrew's kitchen—and proves himself with each accomplishment.

By the time Ruhlman is working the grill station in St. Andrew's, one of the toughest stations in the kitchen, his fellow students are calling him a real cook, not just a writer. Upon graduation and finishing his courses, Ruhlman visits Chef Pardus's home to share a cocktail. In the end, even Pardus acknowledges that Ruhlman is a true cook and his goal is finally accomplished.



# Secret Sharer

## Secret Sharer Summary and Analysis

Ruhlman is given his uniform and a set of knives, provided to him by the Culinary Institute of America, otherwise known as the CIA. He is here to learn how to cook and will document his progress throughout the experience.

His first class is Culinary Skill Development with Chef Michael Pardus. Here, he will learn how to make a great stock. For Pardus, a great stock is judged by flavor, clarity, color, body and aroma. For the next six weeks, Ruhlman and his fellow students will learn how to make a great stock in a kitchen that is 37.5 feet by 26 feet. There are 36 other similar kitchens in the CIA and each costs approximately \$330,000.

The students will take classes simultaneously during their training at the CIA.

Bob del Grosso is a 41-year-old who is a trained micropaleontologist who used to work in the oil industry. However, after much stress in his work environment, he was awakened by the thought that he could cook instead. He now teaches Introduction to Gastronomy to every student who comes into the CIA for training. His lecture suggests that all chefs should be Socratic in order to question and analyze everything they are cooking.

Culinary Math is another class for the introductory students taught by Julia Hill. She teaches students how to convert different mathematical amounts, while understanding that a pint in some measurements does not equal a pint in other foods, such as the difference between a pint of honey and a pint of ground cinnamon.

Each section of the CIA is held in blocks. For the A Block, students learn Culinary Math, Skills and Introduction to Gastronomy. The B Block includes sanitation and nutrition. C Block offers Meat Identification and Fabrication. Each student goes through each of these blocks without variation since the school changes its regiment in 1976. Each block consists of 14 class days, which are spread out over 3 weeks and each block is built on top of the next one.

There are no classes on Sundays and a two-break in the summer and winter, but other than that, the CIA never shuts down. Every three weeks, 72 students graduate consistently. For this reason, the CIA is an area that the food industry watches.

Chef Pardus teaches Ruhlman and the students how to make the perfect mise en place. Not only does Pardus teach them how to make mise en place, he teaches them how to fix things when they go wrong.

# Routine

## Routine Summary and Analysis

By Day Three, the Skills class is moving along nicely. Erica, a student in the class, is having trouble keeping up with the rest of the class. In addition, she has a great deal of trouble with sanitation and loses points each day because of it.

Ruhlman describes the other students in the class and how they end up in the CIA, including Eun-Jung Lee, Ben Grossman, Greg and Adam. The structure of the class consists of Ruhlman demonstrating different recipes or tasks for the students who will then do it on their own in the following days. In addition, Chef Pardus quizzes the students by paper and they will have a final quiz at the end. In addition, they garner points each day for executing smart sanitation and nutrition choices with their food. The idea behind the written quizzes is that graduates of the CIA will become top chefs at fine restaurants and other people will expect them to know the answers to various questions. These quizzes ensure they have those answers.

On Day Five of the Skills class, the students do consomme, which is a complicated dish that really defines a good chef. It is the most interesting thing that the students do while in Skills class and excites Ruhlman. By the end of the lecture, Ruhlman walks out into the cold February night feeling great because Pardus tells him he could be a good cook.



# Day Eight

## Day Eight Summary and Analysis

At exactly six o'clock each day, anyone who is not finished with their mise en place will have points deducted from their overall score each day. In addition to the mise en place, the students learn a number of other mother sauces on top of which classical French sauces are created. Erica brings her split pea soup to Chef Pardus to judge. Seeing her, he sighs in predicted frustration, but upon tasting her soup, he is shocked. Her soup is superb; this step is a huge improvement for Erica and representative of the class standards overall.

Along the way, Pardus is not only teaching them how to make soup and other recipes, but how to work more effectively when they enter the working world of their own restaurants. Despite the chaos that ensues each day, Ruhlman is amazed that by 5:30, many students will walk by with spotless recipes that are due that day. The students eat dinner together after their six o'clock appointment with Pardus and Ruhlman is too tired to even speak with the other students.

The next day, Pardus teaches them how to make a bechamel sauce, despite it being a very overwhelming day for everyone in the class. The group will be split up in sections in order to be responsible for different activities, including mise en place and chopping vegetables.

# Brown Sauce

## Brown Sauce Summary and Analysis

Brown sauce is a main foundation ingredient for learning how to cook classic French cooking. Fine reduced stocks are what American chefs use in their restaurants nowadays, which is why knowing how to create a great brown sauce is so integral to the students' studies.

For Ruhlman, creating a brown sauce is not very exciting. The only pleasant aspect he can find with the instruction is watching Chef Pardus eat eighteen spoonfuls of it each day. Upon research, Ruhlman learns that creating a brown sauce is actually a controversial creation. Different renown chefs have all indicated there are unique ways to create the all-important brown sauce. Here, Ruhlman learns that there are different interpretations on the classical sauces.

Adam Shepard is one of the students in Skills class with Ruhlman. He stands out because he asks so many questions. His questions are complex and articulate, which signals that he has done his research. Originally, Shepard was proficient in wood shops, but after an accident maims the fingers on his right hand, he decides to go into cooking because he likes it. When he and his wife Jessica go to St. Andrew's Cafe, which is one of the CIA restaurants, Shepard thinks it is one of the best meals he has ever had, helping his decision to attend the CIA.

The students learn "a la minute" sauces, which are derivative sauces that can be made in quantity, but finished at the last minute for optimal results while cooking.



# The Storm

## The Storm Summary and Analysis

The Blizzard of '96 starts. The block before Ruhlman's Skills class had ended with a winter storm watch and his block is about to end the same way.

Ruhlman makes it into the CIA an hour and a half late, and decides to leave early to miss a dry run of tomorrow's sauce practical. He does a test with other students on a knife cuts practical that demonstrates how well they have learned to slice vegetables and other prep work. Ruhlman gets a 97.5% out of a possible 100% and races out the door, telling Pardus he is worried about the snow. On the way home, Ruhlman loses control of his car and spins out, but manages to avoid getting into a car accident. He rights the car and drives the rest of the way home safely.

The next morning, the snow continues to fall heavily. It is the final day of Skills and there is a cooking practical that Ruhlman cannot afford to miss. At 12:30, he calls Chef Pardus to tell him he does not think he will be able to make it to class that day. What Chef Pardus tells him next will change his perspective on his schooling at the CIA.

Pardus tells him that he is training students to be chefs and that they have to get somewhere sometimes—no matter what. He tells Ruhlman that he is cut from a different cloth.

After their conversation, Ruhlman risks the weather. He realizes that in the physical world of cooking, the food is either finished at six o'clock or it is not. It is just that simple.

Something has changed for Ruhlman, but he does not have time to think about it. He is too busy answering questions on a written test before his cooking practical begins. Ruhlman "crushes" his cooking practical and gets 199 of a possible 200 points.

Later, Ruhlman tells his wife about the conversation with Pardus and she laughs that Pardus basically called him a wimp. While talking to her, he realizes he wants to be a cook. However, he also wants to tell a factual story that is unbiased. A true desire to become a cook will skew the story and give it a more emotional tone that he had anticipated. However, he is convinced that he wants to become a cook, nonetheless.





# The Making of Chef Pardus and Chapter 7: You Understand What I Am Saying?

## The Making of Chef Pardus and Chapter 7: You Understand What I Am Saying? Summary and Analysis

Chef Pardus is an important aspect of Ruhlman's cooking education. Literally, Pardus teaches Ruhlman a number of techniques and recipes. However, Pardus helps Ruhlman to determine his own passion for cooking.

Ruhlman wants to talk to Pardus about his comments to him on the phone. For Pardus, he says it brings up a lot of emotional topics. He explains that in order to embrace the career of a chef, you have to accept that you will miss many important holidays and events with your family. While everyone else is at home with their family on Mother's Day, for example, Pardus cannot spend time with his mother until the day after. The same is true for Christmas, Thanksgiving and other big holidays. For a successful chef, they have to truly believe they will always be there—no matter what. When he gives this speech to Ruhlman, he is also essentially giving it to himself.

Pardus gives Ruhlman his life history as an explanation of what defines him and how he has ended up teaching Skills at the CIA.

The students start the second part of Skills, which deals with vegetables. Here, the students learn how to slice and cook a variety of vegetables. From time to time, a man named Uwe Hestner, a tall and forceful figure, stops in the Skills Two class. He will watch the class and if a student addresses him, he refers only to Pardus, signaling that he is there to observe the students alone, not participate.

Ruhlman requests a meeting with Hestner to learn more about him. Ruhlman learns about his history as an apprentice in Hotel Reichshof in Hamburg, Germany. If Hestner was officially taught how to make specific recipes like a hollandaise sauce, he does not recall it. However, he is obviously a classic study. When Ruhlman asks how to make the ideal version of stock, he pulls out research and compares all of the top names in cooking to demonstrate that there are many different ways to make the classic stock.

After the interview, Ruhlman returns to the students and talks about how they are starting to apply for their externship—a required minimum 16-week job working in a real restaurant for experience while at the CIA. They will start to learn how to cook a chicken breast on Day Eighteen of the Skills class. The only one that executes the perfect chicken is Erica, once again proving that the last in the class can become the first with sheer dedication.

The conversation with Pardus has cause Ruhlman to analyze and think more about what makes certain people cooks—and what makes other people give up.

# A System of Values and Roux Decree

## A System of Values and Roux Decree Summary and Analysis

The Culinary Skill Development Two sticks to the basics of cooking. They learn how to braise, roast and other basic techniques. However, for Ruhlman, he feels that something else happens to a person in these classes—something that extends beyond the research and techniques. He finds himself solving problems differently and trying to use his time as efficiently as possible just as he would do in the kitchen.

He finds the physical world more friendly because he is finding ways of mastering it in the same way he is mastering the kitchen. The students are given their evaluations in order to review Chef Pardus' performance during their Skills class. Most of the students say that Pardus changes their way of cooking and their feelings during the CIA experience. There are, of course, a few dissidents.

The CIA requires that the group be split up now in order to teach them to work with other groups of people, similar to how they will when they enter the "real world" after their studies. Although the students will split up now, they will always have a bond similar to people who have endured other catastrophic experiences together, according to Ruhlman.

There is a controversy brewing at the CIA—how to make the right version of brown roux. The students start to hear rumors that the instructors are consulting various resources and telling each other which way is the "right" way to create the sauce. Specifically, Pardus is extremely annoyed when he receives an email from Hestner that tells him that he is making the brown roux the wrong way. The arguments that ensue cause Ruhlman to analyze the type of person that becomes a teacher at the CIA. One such example is Rudy Smith, the chef who lectures on the Introduction to Hot Foods. He is a chef who used to live in a teepee during one of his initial cooking jobs. These are people who are cut from a unique cloth.



# Introduction to Hot Foods

## Introduction to Hot Foods Summary and Analysis

Rudy Smith is the main chef for the Introduction to Hot Foods class, which the students will be taking for the next three weeks. Smith has already warned Ruhlman that the first day of the class is like running into a brick wall. By the end of that week, everyone is comfortable and by the end of the session, the kitchen is running itself. However, the day after the session ends, he starts the process all over again with a new set of students.

Ben and Adam, two of the students in the class, like Chef Smith because he gets excited about food and shows his passion. For any student in Chef Smith's class, they have a bulging pocket of three-by-five cards with their prep notes. By five-thirty, all students are ready for Chef Smith to demo the plates for the day. He will prepare one dish at each station and reiterates things that are not considered acceptable in his kitchen.

Similar to Chef Pardus, he will call out questions to the students and get their responses in order to make them really think about what they are cooking and how to improve the process. The students will be cooking for the students in Skills class and Chef Smith calls out the orders as they come in. Afterward, Chef Smith will lecture them on performance and quality.

Fish Kitchen is run by a genuine madman, according to Ruhlman. The chef's name is Corky Clark, a former Vietnam vet who graduated from the CIA in 1971. When Chef Clark gets excited, his voice can reach squeaks at high octaves. The Fish Kitchen does fewer covers than other kitchens mostly due to the fact that the students spend half the day filleting the fish. The students spend only seven days in Fish Kitchen.

Another kitchen for this portion of their studies will be American Regional Cuisine for another seven days. Next, for another seven days, they travel through Oriental to learn various cooking techniques from China, Vietnam and Thailand, among others.

From there, the students travel to Charcuterie, which is a basic learning of the grinding and preparation of forcemeats for sausages and terrines. These items are then shipped all over the school.

Each of the classes are seen as sprints and they take their toll on the students, exhausting them. Along the way, Ruhlman sees his friends from the Skills and other classes, each looking haggard as they wait for their next set of studies to begin. For most of the students, their passion for food is ebbing due to the extreme nature of the CIA courses.



# Lunch Cookery and the Burnt Parsnip

## Lunch Cookery and the Burnt Parsnip Summary and Analysis

Pantry produces the most amount of food at the CIA. It serves between four and five meals every day and is a high-volume kitchen. Chef Shepard is in charge here. She convinces the students that although dinner is the favored meal, lunch is a high money-maker for restaurants as well. Here, the classics will not be ignored despite the volume. Pantry produces some of the most interesting meals for the students. They teach the students classic sandwiches like the Reuben and a good club sandwich.

Lecture will typically end at 10:15 in Pantry and there are two hours to prep before the demo for the day begins. However, on Day Seven, there is no lecture and for this reason, Chef Shepard predicts that the extra time will cause chaos in the kitchen that day. She is absolutely correct when things start to fall apart. Ruhlman is called to help with parsnip chips, but the burner does not get hot enough. Ruhlman serves the chips anyways, although he knows they are burnt. Chef LeBlanc, who used to work at a top establishment and now teaches the evening Charcuterie classes, remonishes Ruhlman for serving an imperfect food.

This experience haunts Ruhlman and he cannot stop thinking about it. In a way, this is one of the characteristics that separates Ruhlman from the other chefs. He expects to have perfection at all times like the other chefs at the CIA, but he is reflective and analytical on a level that the other chefs in the book do not demonstrate. Whether this sensitivity is because of his knowledge that he is writing the novel or whether it is due to his nature is not clear, but it is important to note that Ruhlman is heavily affected by the actions and words of other chefs at the CIA. He blames the sensitivity on the training of the CIA rather than a sensitivity in his personality, but there is never any other mention of a student being as affected as he is over these actions.

Ruhlman refires the parsnip chips and serves Chef LeBlanc directly. He returns to the kitchen and asks Chef Shepard why she allowed the chips to leave and she thinks a moment and states simply: "I didn't want to lose." This statement shows that in addition to perfection, the chefs are also dealing with a great deal of competition at the school.

# President Metz and Garde Manger

## President Metz and Garde Manger Summary and Analysis

Ferdinand Metz is the President of the CIA and Ruhlman finally sees him after being there for three months. He has purposely chosen not to arrange a meeting with him beforehand in order to gain information about him through anecdotes and reactions to him by people encountering him in the hall. He is always trim and professional with an arresting presence for Ruhlman and the other students and chefs at the CIA.

Once a month, on the Thursday before graduation, the school gathers for the Grand Buffet. Here, Intro, Fish and Oriental will all cook the food to be served. Mr. Metz will invite the graduation speaker and guests to come and tour the food served at the CIA. No one will eat before this happens. Nothing short of perfection will be acceptable. He is the driving force behind every student's desire to obtain perfection at the CIA.

Chef Eve Felder is the instructor for Garde Manger, the last block of the first year CIA curriculum. Many of Ruhlman's students from the original Skills class join him for this class. After this class, the students will leave for their mandated externships. Ruhlman runs into Chef Pardus shortly after the session starts and Pardus tells him that he will be teaching Skills in Brazil. The CIA has a certification program in Sao Paulo with many of the same courses taught in the New York school.

The Garde Manger class handles cold items, desserts, decorations, hors d'oeuvres (hot and cold), salads and some sandwiches. For Chef Felder, the backbone of the class will be forcemeat, which is a cooked or raw meat that is grounded or minced. Through her instructions, they will be able to take a few leftover dishes and feed sixteen-to-twenty servings through the use of forcemeat.



# The Second-Term Practical and Bewitched

## The Second-Term Practical and Bewitched Summary and Analysis

Among the final tests at the CIA before the students leave for externship is the second-term practical. During the final week of Garde Manger, they must take a cooking test. If you are late, you fail. If your food cannot be eaten, you fail. You will be given a menu and you will cook it for a chef who will rate your performance.

Ruhlman is given a "Braise, Steak/Lamb Shank, Cauliflower, Snow Peas, Mashed Potatoes, Onion." First, he has to take a verbal test (in which he gets a perfect score) and then sits down to start building one of the easier menu choices for the practical. He overdoes his soup, but argues its consistency to the chef and gets away with a 91.7 overall score.

The Monday after the second-term practical, Chef Felder starts to bewitch Ruhlman. She has incredible passion for making food and inspires Ruhlman with her practicality and resources. While cooking one afternoon, Ruhlman is assigned to make lobster salad. He needs mache to complete the dish. He cannot find it anywhere in the storeroom and there is a limited amount in the CIA. Mr. Metz has taken the last box of mache for his own personal use. Ruhlman has to run to another chef in Pantry to request the lobster salad and is granted a few sprigs, limiting their lobster salad production from 8 salads to a mere 4.

Chef Felder's commitment to the students is to teach them that cooking takes time in order to be successful. You cannot be a great cook without paying attention to the details—and taste is hugely important. She wants to teach them formulas so that they will understand the basic formula and how to taste. She operates in ratios, not specific amounts. Finally, she begs her students to be as responsible with the Earth as they can possibly be. If we screw up the Earth, she argues, we will have rotten food.



# Externship and Thermal Death Point

## Externship and Thermal Death Point Summary and Analysis

Ruhlman finds his fellow student Adam to learn more about the externship, trailing behind him at his job for a few days to get a feel for the experience. Adam works on one station and is consistently busy at the Monkey Bar under a man named John Schenk, who is one of the ten best new chefs of 1995. Ruhlman hears about the experiences of the other students as well, but does not do an externship himself.

The second year of the CIA courses continue with the Bakeshop Two under Chef Coppedge. In Ruhlman's words, Chef Coppedge makes "bread cool." For Coppedge, cooking is a mad dash, chaotic environment. In the baking world, you are more regimented and disciplined. There are no stoves in the bakeshops, only ovens and there is a kind of ease that Ruhlman does not feel elsewhere at the CIA.

Because yeast is alive, the chefs are learning how to bake a living thing. It is a scientific process that requires a lot more patience and specific skills compared to cooking. Bakers do not fidget; cooks fidget. Coppedge teaches his students how to make a variety of different breads during their time there, but he also teaches them the fundamental differences between cooking and baking.





# St. Andrew's Cafe and St. Andrew's Kitchen

## St. Andrew's Cafe and St. Andrew's Kitchen Summary and Analysis

Part of the curriculum for CIA students is to learn how to wait tables in order to gain a better understanding of what waiters go through while in the restaurant. They learn what the appropriate dress code is and the particular stresses of being a waiter. In order to gain a different perspective on St. Andrew's Cafe before serving there, Ruhlman takes his wife and daughter there as an anonymous customer. They are greeted by Phillip Papineau and seated. As soon as they are seated, they are immediately brought some bread for Ruhlman's eleven-month-old daughter, which he and his wife greatly appreciate.

Overall, the staff range from awkward to delightfully attentive, but Ruhlman feels incredibly at ease in the St. Andrew's Cafe.

Soon, Ruhlman himself will be serving at St. Andrew's Cafe. He fastens his apron and bow tie on and gets ready with the impressive Mr. Papineau. He tells the wait staff they must have a pen, dupe pad, crumber and wine key with them every day at all times in the Cafe. He teaches them the appropriate ways to handle table service, including everything from order taking to changing the linens in between customers. His key remark is that customers' eyes always go to the mistakes, so you must be perfect in order to keep them happy.

Ruhlman struggles with waiting tables, but gradually recovers and eventually even serves Mr. Metz and his friends for the evening.

After his tenure waiting tables, Ruhlman is allowed to go back and cook for the people that he has just waited on. He will be working with Chef De Santis on family meal, which means that he will be serving the students; it is considered the lowest position in the Kitchen. Nonetheless, Ruhlman compares Chef De Santis to Jack Nicholson for his dramatic flair and passion while talking to them.

The goal at St. Andrew's Kitchen is to serve healthy food that does not taste healthy. In other words, the Kitchen aims to be a healthy restaurant that serves scrumptious food in a manner that is less bad for you by substituting other ingredients in to replace "bad" fats and other inferior ingredients.



# Taste and Theater of Perfection

## Taste and Theater of Perfection Summary and Analysis

Chef De Santis continues to teach the students how to best handle themselves in a real, working kitchen. He emphasizes taste above all else to his students. For him, it is an extremely valuable thing for a chef to learn how to do. He works on the conceptual skills with the class in order to help them plan and get ready for their graduation.

He teaches them business acumen, including giving them quick lessons on placement of food items on their menu and mentions of financial assistance. He teaches them how to make the famous quail-egg pizza that will be served at their graduation. The pizza is originally created by Chef De Santis for President Metz and has become a traditional serving. The students eat the quail egg pizza with caviar and a glass of champagne when they are finished.

For Ruhlman, his two parting memories about the CIA will be eating the quail-egg-and-caviar pizza with egg running down his chin and Chef De Santis, standing on his toes, yelling about taste.

More than a year and a half later, Ruhlman requests an interview with Mr. Metz. From his perspective, he feels you cannot best see a mountain from a helicopter ride and it is best to climb the terrain and then reflect on it. Now he wants to know more about Mr. Metz.

He meets the Senior Vice President, Tim Ryan, whose success has been a lifetime achievement of being one of the youngest and most successful chefs of all time. He discusses a brown roux with Ruhlman and finally concludes that the culture of the CIA dictates that they are not trendy and will continue to teach all of the mother sauces in Skills class as they have in the past. Ryan also reiterates the lesson that Ruhlman learned during the Blizzard of '96 when Pardus lectured him to just make it to class. For Ryan, the sentiment is a bigger perspective, noting that many people will prefer to take the easy way out and not get to their jobs; however, if they do not arrive at their job that day, they will not get paid. For this reason, "being there" is an important lesson that the CIA wants to teach its students and enforce as one of its values.

Mr. Metz becomes president in 1980 and enrollment goes from eighteen hundred to sixteen thousand. He is responsible for essentially building the CIA into what it is today. Ruhlman describes him as being a line chef with an MBA and an R&D man with a foot firmly in the corporate world.

To gain a successful cooking career, Metz believes that a student must be able to thoroughly execute and demonstrate basic cooking principles. Also, he believes that he can pass on the value of passion to his students through the passion shown in the

instructors. He wants students to learn by example and he wants there to be plenty of physical examples surrounding the students. Finally, he wants to give his students a sense of balance with their lives as well.



# American Bounty Restaurant and Benediction

## American Bounty Restaurant and Benediction Summary and Analysis

The last stop for Ruhlman is the American Bounty Restaurant, the CIA's finest restaurant. Ruhlman holds his own in the kitchen and when he leaves, is given the ultimate compliment of another chef telling him that he did not cook like a writer, he cooked like a real chef. This is what Ruhlman has ultimately been wanting to hear since he started the CIA courses. He learns at the end of his Culinary education that part of the secret to success here is to always keep moving. It is a vagabond lifestyle and to keep moving is to stay active in the career. Of course, if you come from the CIA, you have to keep moving perfectly.

After Ruhlman receives his ultimate compliment, he drives to Chef Pardus's home to have a drink with him on his back porch. As they relax, Pardus also tells him that he is now a cook—if he was working the grill station on a Saturday afternoon at the American Bounty restaurant, he has succeeded. This causes a huge powerful surge of emotion for Ruhlman since he has been driven to become a cook since his conversation over the Blizzard of '96 with Pardus. Now he is proud to call himself a true cook.



# Characters

## Michael Ruhlman

The narrator and main character throughout the autobiography, Ruhlman moves his family from Cleveland to Hudson Valley, New York simply to enroll at the CIA and learn how to become a great chef. He lives with his wife, a photographer and their small daughter.

Ruhlman starts out with a strong desire to learn how to cook, but a crisis of identity as to whether he sees himself as a true cook. Initially, Ruhlman is a writer who wants to know how to cook. After an important conversation with Chef Pardus, Ruhlman changes his direction. He suddenly realizes that he wants to be seen as a cook. This moment changes him and he begins to truly embrace his course sessions, although he has to sacrifice his unbiased perspective.

Along the way, Ruhlman learns a variety of techniques and gains a stronger understanding of the CIA and its main influential characters, including Chef Pardus and President Ferdinand Metz. By the end of his courses, Ruhlman finishes his courses and earns the respect of his peers, while establishing himself as a true cook. He even gets Chef Pardus to admit to it!

## Chef Pardus

The first chef that Ruhlman has in his classes at the CIA, Chef Pardus plays an influential role in Ruhlman's achievements and attitude at the CIA. Pardus is originally from Connecticut and after graduating high school, he hitchhikes to Boston. After getting small side jobs for a few years, he decides that he wants to attend the CIA. His father will not give him the tuition money since he had blown the previous tuition on Boston University without attending any classes. Eventually, Pardus moves back home and saves the money to attend the CIA. From there, he works at various restaurants until he comes back to the CIA to be an influential teacher, instructing all students through their Skills courses. He will be a driving force for Ruhlman's views while at the CIA and his main motivation in becoming a true cook.

## Erica

A student in Ruhlman's Skills, Erica is a 19-year-old from suburban Philadelphia. She is short with thick brown hair and the bluest eyes Ruhlman has ever seen. She starts out as one of the worst students in Pardus' class, but by the end of the session block, she improves and becomes the symbol of how far a person can come in the Skills class alone.



## **Eun-Jung Lee**

Eun-Jung Lee is a young student in the class from Seoul. She had worked with some of the best chefs in Korea, but has trouble with the English language and consequently messes up some of her dishes in Skills class with Ruhlman.

## **Ben Grossman**

The leader in the Skills class with Ruhlman, Grossman is a 25-year-old guy from Rockland County, New York. He works for a year as an accountant in New York, but in 1993, an article in the New Yorker with a recipe for turkey meatloaf sets him on a quest to become a chef.

## **Georges Auguste Escoffier**

Although not a physical character in the novel, Escoffier follows Ruhlman throughout his studies at the CIA. Escoffier's book, *Le Guide Culinaire*, is a bible-esque method of instruction for all students. When the students are in doubt about how to handle various classical French cooking techniques, they refer to Escoffier's publications.

## **President Ferdinand Metz**

The President of the CIA since 1980, Ferdinand Metz has literally transformed the school, adding classes and facilities. He likes to stay on the cutting edge of everything in the cooking world and is seen as a demi-god to many of the students that work there. After Ruhlman leaves the CIA, he returns to interview Metz and get his perspective on the CIA and what the values there are.

Metz believes that passion and experience can be taught simultaneously at the CIA. Also, he keeps a sharp eye on the latest techniques and tactics to keep his students on the cutting edge. In addition, he works hard to give them the values that will make them successful and good representations of the CIA when they graduate.

## **Vice President Tim Ryan**

One of the most successful young chefs, Ryan is hired by Metz to help take the CIA into another level of influence and success. Ryan has a long conversation with Ruhlman after he finishes his courses at the CIA to give him his perspective on the school. For Ryan, he believes that the conversation Ruhlman had with Pardus during the blizzard underlies a basic value that the CIA wants to teach their students, which is to "get there" and work hard.



## **Chef Eve Felder**

The Chef instructor for Garde Manger, Chef Felder inspires Ruhlman with her passion for her food and practicality. She can turn a single serving of meat into a meal for sixteen-to-twenty through ingenuity and creativity; she is also very Earth-conscious.

## **Chef Ron De Santis**

For Ruhlman, one of his final memories will be De Santis, on his tiptoes, telling them to concentrate on "taste!" He is the chef that Ruhlman has for the final stages of his courses at the CIA.



## Objects/Places

### The Culinary Institute of America or the CIA

The cooking school in Hudson Valley, New York where Ruhlman attends to learn how to become a chef. The CIA is considered one of the most influential factors in the food industry as its students consistently impact the food industry. No matter what else is going on, those individuals who are aware of the food industry pay attention to the CIA.

### Chef Pardus' Home

After Ruhlman finishes his courses at the CIA, he stops by Chef Pardus' home in order to reflect on his experiences at the CIA. It is here that Ruhlman hears Pardus tell him what he wants to hear: that he can be considered a true cook.

### K-2 Class

The classroom where Chef Pardus teaches the Skills at the CIA

### Tivoli, New York

The location where Ruhlman moves with his wife and daughter while he attends the CIA. It is important to note that Tivoli is not nearby the CIA, which is important during the Blizzard of '96

### Tongs

For the cooks at the CIA, they will often need their tongs while cooking. Eun-Lee Yung is notorious for taking other students' tongs for her own use.

### Monkey Bar

For Adam, a student with Ruhlman, the Monkey Bar is where he performs his externship. Ruhlman follows him around during his externship to get a feel for how this section of the CIA course training is for the other students.

### Cleveland, Ohio

The location where Ruhlman moves his family, including his young daughter and wife, who is a professional photographer with paying clients.





## **Le Guide Culinaire**

The cookbook by Auguste Escoffier that students will use as their guide throughout the CIA courses. The cookbook is one of the leaders in classic French cooking techniques.

## **Pen, Dupe Pad, Crumber and Wine Key**

The four items that Philip Papineau requires all of the students learning how to wait tables have on their person at all times.

## **Mache**

While working Garde Manger, the kitchen runs out of this important ingredient for its lobster salad. When Ruhlman races to find more mache, he learns that President Metz has taken the rest of it for the weekend for his own personal use, which Ruhlman later finds out is to make his own lobster salad.



# Themes

## Perserverance

One of the first things that Ruhlman learns while at the CIA is perseverance. Erica, one of the students in the Skills class with Ruhlman, becomes a symbol of the importance of perseverance while taking her courses there. Initially, she burns or destroys everything she tries to cook. Even Chef Pardus gives up hope for her.

However, Erica does not give up. She works studiously while at the CIA and will eventually learn how to cook the sauces and dishes properly. In the end, she delivers a perfect split pea soup and executes her cooking practicals flawlessly. She will go on to have a successful experience while at the CIA.

Ruhlman himself also learns to stick with his courses at the CIA. When he later has conversations with President Metz and VP Ryan, he learns that stick-to-it-ness is one of the values that the chefs and instructors aim to teach their students while they are at the school. Since the CIA is essentially a trade school, it can be an incredibly beneficial lesson to learn that if you persevere, you will be able to overcome the actions that might frustrate you at first.

## Getting There

As Vice President Tim Ryan states, if you do not show up, you do not get paid. For this reason, it is important for all students to show up to the class every day. Ruhlman learns the lesson well when he leaves class early and then calls Chef Pardus to tell him that he will not be showing up to class that day because of the snow falling during the Blizzard of '96. Upon hearing that he will not be coming to class, Chef Pardus bluntly tells him that while Ruhlman is a nice guy, he is basically a writer and is not cut from the same cloth as the rest of the cooks at the CIA. Nevertheless, he understands Ruhlman's choice.

When Ruhlman hangs up, he is highly agitated. However, he drives through the Blizzard and makes it. Later, he talks with Pardus and the Chef tells him that the fact that chefs are always there when they need to be is important to their careers. They do not spend time with their mothers on Mothers Day and often work during important holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving. However, it is a part of their career and a sacrifice they have to make so for Pardus, he explains it as being part of his personality and that those that do not "get there" are cut from a different cloth.

VP Ryan will also reiterate Pardus' sentiments when Ruhlman brings up the subject with him during his interview. Ryan points out that the CIA wants to teach its cooks that it is essential they are there because if they are not, they will not be paid. Also, they will be CIA graduates and he wants each student to represent the school's values. The school



stays open and rarely closes in order to teach the students that they need to be there and not take the "easy" way out.

## Passion

Another important value that the CIA wants to teach its students is passion. Although President Metz agrees that you cannot teach a student passion, you can inspire them by example. In this way, the CIA works hard to give its students a passion for cooking and overall curiosity about what they are doing—and why it works. Many of the instructors will question the students, have them think in a Socratic way about cooking and not take things for granted. When students change their way of thinking, they can be more successful and innovative cooks.

Chef Felder is a specific example of how the instructors at the CIA teach their students how to be passionate and creative with their food choices. Someone like Chef Coppedge is also a good example of how the instructors teach passion in the classroom. He inspires a quiet passion for baking (rather than cooking) among the students that come into his bread-baking class.

When the students leave the CIA, the school wants them to stay on the cutting edge. They want their students to continue to be the influential factors that they are in the food industry and with plenty of passion, the students will keep their end of the deal. The most innovative chefs are those that question even the most traditional dishes to make people think about their food in a new and different way, while still having a full understanding of the classic techniques.

# Style

## Perspective

The novel is a documentary, but it is not an unbiased account of the experiences there. Instead, Ruhlman tells of his experience from his perspective alone. In order to gain some viewpoints from other main characters in the novel, he will interview them to allow each person to give their background and personal thoughts on specific topics. Some of these topics include how to make a brown roux or brown sauce, one of the classic mother sauces taught during the Skills class at the CIA. Also, he lets various chefs weigh in on the perceived values of the CIA, such as passion, balance and a sense of responsibility to be where they need to be, no matter what. These interviews lend more information and flush out a more complete experience of the CIA for the reader.

Nevertheless, the perspective of the novel stays mostly with Ruhlman. For example, the only time we have an insight into his personal life is a conversation he has with his wife after the infamous conversation with Chef Pardus. Of course, the novel is not an autobiography and is trying to be strictly a documentary, but Ruhlman himself brings up his family life and moving them from Cleveland so frequently that an insight or interview from his wife might have added additional perspective to the experience. Also, an interview from Pardus or De Santis on Ruhlman's performance during his classes would also have given more depth to the novel.

## Tone

The tone of the novel is generally straightforward. Ruhlman tries to keep his writing direct and straightforward, void of much emotion. The reader will expect this since it is told from his perspective as a writer documenting what it takes to attend classes at the CIA. The tone of the novel rarely changes; however, during key moments of the book, such as the conversation with Chef Pardus during the Blizzard of '96, Ruhlman will exhibit more emotion in his writing. In addition, he lends personal touches, such as his recollection of two memories when he leaves the CIA as being the quail-egg-and-caviar pizza with champagne and Chef De Santis' passionate emphasis to "TASTE!" what they eat.

The tone of the novel initially seems more stand-offish, as if Ruhlman is trying very hard to stay objective and removed from his cooking responsibilities while in the school. However, as the school progresses and he builds relationships, Ruhlman spends more time doing interviews and talking with his classmates versus talking about the CIA as a whole. Overall, the tone of the book starts out more informative and "documentary"-like than it does towards the end, where the reader feels more as though they just finished a biography on a writer who has now established himself as a food critic and novelist in the food industry.

## Structure

The structure of the novel is essentially linear. Ruhlman begins the book with entering the first class—Introduction to Skills with Chef Pardus—on the first day with all of his necessary equipment. From there, he processes through the courses in the same time structure as the rest of the students, as if he were truly an individual going to the CIA to become a cook, rather than a writer who is taking the classes to document the experience.

After Ruhlman completes the courses and delivers detailed accounts and conversations within each classroom setting to give the reader a better understanding of the chef's personality, he interviews the president and vice president of the CIA. In his words, he wants to understand a mountain and therefore scales it from the bottom to the top summit. Once he has completed that, he goes back a year and a half later to interview President Metz and VP Ryan to learn what their goals and perceived values for the school and its students should be. These final interviews give the reader a better understanding of the overall structure and reasons behind what the CIA does and teaches its students.



## Quotes

"I stopped at the mirror. I had not been in a uniform since high school football and I sent myself an ironic lift of the eyebrows, then an uncertain shrug," (p. 1).

"He would then serve them with potatoes that had been fried in clarified butter, along with deep-fried parsley. 'Have you had deep-fried parsley?' he asked. He closed his eyes and said, 'It's a miracle,'" (p. 15).

"The lesson it taught me was that the chef hadn't used the potato as a basis for displaying flashy, flamboyant skills, but had placed his skills as an artist in the service of the potato," (p. 7).

"I know of no more infelicitous name for a standard ingredient or item than brown sauce," (p. 55).

"'We're different,' he said. 'We get there. It's part of what makes us a chef.' I was quiet. 'We like it that way. That's why this place never shuts down. And we're teaching the students this,'" (p. 69).

"But something happened to you in Skills class that was greater than learning how to season pasta water or braise shank. It was more than technique, more than ratios, and more than knowledge. Something was slowly being woven into one's very fiber, something that extended out and into everything one touched. I couldn't name it. I'm not sure it had a name. I could only point to parts of it," (p. 103).

"Something significant happened to most everyone in Skills, not unlike that which happens to strangers who endure a catastrophe together—a plane crash, say or a shipwreck. There is a common and permanent bond that will remain no matter where they go," (p. 109).

"'It was a parsnip,' LeBlanc exclaimed. 'Now it's burnt!' With that, LeBlanc took his club, pickle, two olives, burnt root vegetables, and departed," (p.140).

"Once the first lean dough was mixing, Coppedge said, 'I know you're used to cooking. Cooking is a mad dash. Baking is different. Baking is regimented. It is disciplined,'" (p. 189).

"A sloppy table will take the food down a notch, he warned. The customer's eye goes to the mistake first—a crumb on the chair, fleck of tarnish on the tip of a knife in an otherwise sparkling silver setup. 'When it's right,' Mr. Papineau said, eyes narrowing at the challenge, 'they don't notice a thing,'" (p. 209).

"I felt it, too. If we'd both been wearing helmets, I would have grunted and cracked heads with him. You needed that energy—it helped you focus; you forgot about the heat and were unaware of time," (p. 240).



"This is the CIA and we're professional here. There's no time for joking around.' Then he said, 'Oh, I forgot, you're a writer.' John, who was still organizing the mise en place on our shelf, trying to fit it all in, looked at Gene and said, 'You wouldn't have known it today.' This halted me," (p. 284).



## Topics for Discussion

What are Ruhlman's goals for writing this book? What does he want to gain from moving his family from their home in Cleveland, Ohio to Hudson Valley, New York?

Do you think that Ruhlman gives an unbiased account of what a student goes through when they sign on to take classes at the CIA?

How do the instructors at the CIA teach their students creativity and passion in their students?

Name some of the differences between cooking on the line in a kitchen and the atmosphere and experiences in Chef Coppedge's baking rooms.

How does the Blizzard of '96 impact Ruhlman and his experiences at the CIA?

Describe the impact and influence that President Metz has on the students at the CIA.

Name the values that Metz says he wants to instill in the students at the CIA.