

# **Tender at the Bone: Growing Up at the Table Study Guide**

**Tender at the Bone: Growing Up at the Table by Ruth Reichl**

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## Plot Summary

*Tender at the Bone* is the memoir of Ruth Reichl, food writer, restaurant critic and editor of *Gourmet Magazine*. Ruth's mother is possibly the worst cook in the world, and regularly served rotted food to unsuspecting guests. Mother is also bipolar, which makes her unpredictable, prone to tantrums and dramas. As a child, one of Ruth's earliest memories is standing in front of a tray of rotted food, protecting her favorite guests from eating it. This makes Ruth realize the importance of good food and how dangerous an appreciation for food can be. At the engagement party for Ruth's older half-brother Bob, Mother first charges the guests of honor an admission fee and then gives them and their friends food poisoning.

Ruth's father is inattentive because he is always preoccupied with Mother's domestic dramas, tantrums and chaos. As a result, Ruth seeks solace in the kitchen, with her foster grandmother Aunt Birdie and various cooks employed by the families. There, Ruth learns that most problems can be solved with a pan of brownies. When Ruth casually compliments her mother's command of the French language, she is shipped off to a boarding school in Canada, where the staff and other students do not know one word of French. After a traumatic year, Ruth makes friends and even finds a few fellow food-lovers.

Ruth's parents abandon her again in high school, when she lives alone in a house in Connecticut while they spend the week in New York City. Ruth copes by cooking huge meals for a crowd of friends who cut classes to hang out at her house. This pattern repeats itself in college and afterward in a commune. Despite her mother's disapproval, Ruth continues to cook after grad school, instead of getting a real job. She is accepted as a chef in a collectively owned restaurant in Berkeley, California during the early 1970s. There, Ruth uses food to cope with life's problems and distract herself from them.

The story comes full circle when Ruth's mother plans another big party, this time an 100th birthday celebration for Aunt Birdie. Ruth is able to separate herself from her mother's destructive behavior and plan a simple, elegant menu that does not poison any guests. Ruth's mother loudly proclaims that it is the best party she — Mother — has ever thrown. Determined to become a professional caterer, Ruth returns to California. Fate intervenes, however, when she is offered a job as a restaurant critic for a new magazine in San Francisco. Despite her mother's objections, Ruth embarks on a wonderful career as a food writer and editor.



# Chapters 1 & 2

## Chapters 1 & 2 Summary and Analysis

*Tender at the Bone* is the memoir of Ruth Reichl. It traces her development from a precocious two year old to a professional chef, restaurant critic for the *New York Times* and editor of *Gourmet Magazine*. Along the way, young Ruth addresses issues including her mother's needy, irrational behavior due to bipolar disorder and her father's passivity. She uses every tool in the kitchen to save herself from their insanity and create wonderful meals for her friends.

In *The Queen of Mold*, Ruth's mother fancies herself a marvelous cook, and often throws dinner parties. However, she has the disconcerting habit of serving odd concoctions of food that are past their prime or even moldy. Twelve-year-old Ruth is especially concerned when her mother throws an engagement party for Ruth's older brother, Bob. She invites hundreds of people and makes the party a benefit for UNICEF, the UN's charity for children. Ruth is horrified that Bob's fiancée and her family will have to pay to attend the party in their honor.

Even worse, at the party Mother serves food that has been unrefrigerated for four days, including soup made with rotted crab meat. For appetizers, she buys hundreds of tiny containers of leftovers of prepared food and mixes them all together—potato salad, coleslaw, ham, cold macaroni and cheese.

Mother considers the party a great success because it is featured in all the local papers, including photos. However, many of the guests fall ill with food poisoning afterwards and twenty-six of them have to have their stomachs pumped at the hospital. Irrationally, Mother refuses to admit that her food could have caused the illness.

In *Grandmothers*, six-year-old Ruth's parents go to Europe for a month. Nanny, her grandmother from Cleveland, is supposed to care for Ruth the entire time, but Ruth and Nanny bore each other. After three days, Nanny leaves Ruth in the care of her foster grandmother. The tiny, charming, elderly Aunt Birdie's best friend is her cook from Barbados, Alice. The three spent afternoons in Alice's kitchen, recreating wonderful dishes that are served at Alice's wedding banquet, including fried oysters, salmon with lobster sauce and chicken croquettes. Alice can cook any dish imaginable. The shopkeepers treat her with reverence, giving her only the finest meats and produce. Anytime Alice is not sure how to respond to a crisis, she cooks apple dumplings with hard sauce, which is Ruth's favorite.

Ruth is eager to learn the mystery of Hortense, Aunt Birdie's daughter who was Ruth's father's first wife. Ruth imagines that Hortense must be dead or in jail for murder. On page 30, Alice cryptically remarks, "He married two of them..." It is years before Ruth understands that Alice means Father married two crazy women—Hortense and Ruth's mother Miriam. Eventually, Ruth learns that the couple divorced after Hortense was



confined to a mental hospital. Ruth's father remarks that Alice and Aunt Birdie did not prepare Hortense for the real world, but in fact, the appreciation for good food and the comforting rituals of Alice's kitchen are excellent preparation for Ruth's real life as a professional chef and food writer.



# Chapters 3 & 4

## Chapters 3 & 4 Summary and Analysis

The chapter titled Mrs. Peavey provides insights into Ruth's early life. Although Mother cooks for parties, everyday cooking is left up to eight-year-old Ruth and the maid of the moment. By far the most interesting of these is Mrs. Peavey, a wealthy woman fallen on hard times due to her binge drinking. She shows Ruth how to make blackberry pie and brownies. Mrs. Peavey's three adult sons arrive in a chauffeured car and beg her to speak to them, but she refuses. The elderly woman does not want her sons to see her in reduced circumstances, working as a maid. Later, Ruth learns that Mr. Peavey left his fortune to his sons, who want to tell Mrs. Peavey how to live her life.

Ruth's mother pays her young daughter to stay alone at night and babysit herself, even on school nights, claiming that Ruth is unusually mature for her age. In fact, Ruth has to act unusually mature due to her mother's mood swings and instability, symptoms of her mental illness. Every evening starts the same way, with Mother claiming that she would rather not go out. Father complains that the evening will be boring without her. Finally, she allows Father to cajole her into going to a party or restaurant.

One evening Mrs. Peavey returns, drunk, with a male friend. They tell Ruth to get the money out of her piggy bank and take her to a bar. When Mrs. Peavey goes on a drinking binge and did not return for several days, Ruth misses her intensely. Mother serves dinners of undercooked roast beef and frozen peas still icy in the center. Finally, Ruth volunteers to make a dinner of wiener schnitzel, salad and brownies. Walking home from the grocery, Ruth panics and realizes that she does not know exactly how to cook the food. Fortunately, Mrs. Peavey returns just in the nick of time. However, she cannot stay. Mrs. Peavey tells Ruth that she has decided to become a professional cook. The light in her eyes implies that this is a noble undertaking and foreshadows Ruth's decision to devote her life to cooking and to writing about food.

In Mars, twelve-year-old Ruth goes to France with her mother for the first time in 1960. Mother's mood swings are worse than ever, with Ruth and Father doing everything to please her. Mother takes Ruth to have a designer dress fitted. Afterward, the entire family goes out to dinner, finished with a lovely lemon souffle. Trying to flatter her mother, Ruth impulsively wishes aloud that she spoke French like her mother.

One Friday when Ruth is barely 13, her mother picks her up after school, spoiling Ruth's plans with friends. Mother tells Ruth they are spending the weekend in Montreal. They take an overnight train. The next morning, Mother takes Ruth directly from the train to a French convent. To her shock, Ruth learns that she is to attend the school, where no one can speak English. The other students call her "Root", the French pronunciation of her name.



Ruth feels like she has been abandoned on Mars. Unable to speak French, she cannot communicate with the other girls or keep up in class. On the weekends, all the other girls go home to their families but Ruth is abandoned at school, alone. Eventually she fills the long, lonely weekends by going to an American movie, eating pastrami sandwiches in a deli and buying dozens of pastries that she eats in bed while reading novels.

One weekend Beatrice, a popular rich girl, is forced to stay at school over the weekend as punishment for a minor transgression. Ruth takes Beatrice with her to the movies and deli, and the two became fast friends. The next weekend, Beatrice invites Ruth to join her family in Ottawa. There, Ruth is served sumptuous meals prepared by the family's French chef. Beatrice's father is thrilled to find another food-lover in his midst, and takes delight in teaching her about French cuisine. From then on, Ruth spends every weekend with the banker's family. The two girls make lemon soufflé for Beatrice's father on his birthday.



# Chapters 5 & 6

## Chapters 5 & 6 Summary and Analysis

In *Devil's Food*, after three years at the French school in Montreal, Ruth longs to finish high school in New York. When she returns, however, her parents have other ideas. Mother sells the family's weekend home in Wilton, Connecticut and buys a suburban house within commuting distance of New York. Ruth has matured into an awkward rebellious teen and her parents are accustomed to their freedom. Soon, she is living by herself in the Connecticut house while her parents stay in the New York apartment all week. Mom and Dad return only for the weekends, believing Ruth is mature enough to stay in the house alone during the week.

Ruth's home immediately becomes the party house. She cuts class regularly to hang out at her home with her unsavory friends. Ruth is plump and not funny or talented. She is not a cheerleader, dancer or athlete, but she can cook. She has a crush on Tommy Calfano, but finds it much easier to invite the whole crowd to her house for a party, rather than spend time alone with him.

One Friday night, after speeding in her ancient Plymouth convertible, Ruth holds an open house for her friends. Couples come and go, dancing, drinking and smoking. Ruth feeds everyone matzo brei, an egg dish her mother taught her to cook. Then she bakes a devil's food cake. While the cake is in the oven, Ruth and Tommy kiss on the sofa. She worries about the cake, but Tommy assures her that someone will take it out of the oven. Ruth falls asleep with her head on Tommy's shoulder.

When Ruth wakes up, it is six in the morning and her parents are due to arrive any minute. Ruth quickly rouses the naked couples sleeping in the bedrooms while Tommy empties the ashtrays and hides the booze. They pile all the dirty dishes on the dining room table, and Ruth quickly prepares coffee and orange juice. When her parents arrive, they think Ruth has invited a bunch of friends for breakfast. Ruth is in love with Tommy, but right after Christmas he enlists in the navy. Heartbroken, she applies to colleges as far away as possible and is accepted into the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

In *The Tart*, Ruth gets a summer job at the local Dairy Queen. However, Mom has other ideas. She has convinced a New York publisher to let her write a book about working abroad. Mom spends the summer in Paris, and arranges a summer job as a counselor at a boy's camp on the tiny island of Oleron for Ruth. Unlike other camps, this one offers no hobbies, crafts or sports for the campers. The underprivileged, underweight kids from the city are expected only to play on the beach and gain weight eating three sumptuous meals plus snacks every day. The counselors have most afternoons free while the campers nap.





The one male counselor Ruth is attracted to is not interested in her. Instead, Ruth befriends Danielle, an attractive counselor with no interest in romance. One day Ruth convinces Danielle to hitchhike to the opposite end of the island with her, during the camp siesta. A couple from Paris gives them a ride, but only halfway across the island, to the home of a cheesemaker named Marie. The greedy Parisian woman spends hours shopping, buying everything in sight, paying double the usual price. Danielle is in a panic, sure that they will return to camp too late, and be fired.

Finally, the Parisian couple decide to return. Marie learns of Danielle's panic and gives the two girls a raspberry tart to give to the camp director. Marie is sure that this will prevent them from being fired. The two girls return to find that no one has missed them. In gratitude, they give the tart to the camp counselor who covered for them. On their next day off, Ruth and Danielle return to Marie's cheese shop and she teaches them to make the delicious raspberry tart.



# Chapters 7 & 8

## Chapters 7 & 8 Summary and Analysis

Chapters seven and eight highlight Ruth's experiences with civil rights during the 1960s. In *Serafina*, Ruth arrives at the University of Michigan all alone, to meet her roommate from Detroit. Serafina's parents are originally from Guyana and are of French and Indian heritage. Serafina has straight, shiny black hair and light brown skin. When Mom finally meets Serafina, she is shocked that Ruth's roommate is "negro." Ruth assures her mother that Serafina is not. The two girls become best friends and roommates throughout college. Both girls love to cook, with Serafina making spicy curries and delicious coconut bread from her mother's recipe.

Serafina is thrilled when her boyfriend Rob gives her his fraternity pin to wear during their first year of college. Rob's fraternity brothers resent it, because it means that a non-white girl is symbolically part of the fraternity. Rob ignores their racism. However, the couple break up when Serafina, a devout Catholic, refuses to have sex with him.

In the last year of college, something changes. Serafina takes a boyfriend home to meet her parents. When she returns to the apartment, she is cold and remote. She throws out all her favorite records, and starts listening to Aretha Franklin. Finally, Serafina tells Ruth why. While she is at home, Serafina learns that she is adopted. After badgering the adoption agency, she discovers that she is the illegitimate child of a Polish nurse and a Negro garbage man.

Although Serafina is bi-racial, in her own eyes and the mood of the late 1960s, she has suddenly discovered that she is black. When she finally leaves the shared apartment for good, Serafina leaves a note telling Ruth that she has discovered the part of herself that had always been missing. On page 118, Serafina's note says "'You are the only white person to whom something has to be said. My people are me. I'm no longer lost.' And this is how she ended it: 'I hope you find your Africa.'"

The chapter *Summer of Love* takes place the previous summer, during 1967, when Serafina and Ruth share her parent's apartment in New York City. Ruth's summer job is in social work, helping poor families. Mrs. Foster is nineteen like Ruth, but has three daughters. The oldest child is six. The girls' father leaves when Mrs. Foster becomes pregnant with the youngest. Despite her poverty, Mrs. Foster keeps her tiny apartment spotless. She also whips her daughters with belts and extension cords when they misbehave. Ruth takes the family on several outings including a trip to the Statue of Liberty. Mrs. Foster loves the Staten Island Ferry, and rides it back and forth several times, enjoying the cool, fresh breezes.

Ruth's college friend Mac, a tall, thin black man, arrives for a visit. He and Ruth take Mrs. Foster and the children on a boat ride and a picnic in the park. On the way home, the little girls have to use the bathroom urgently. They stop by Ruth's apartment. When



Ruth returns that night, her mother has phoned. The doorman has complained about Ruth bringing black people into the building. In a blatant show of racism, he says some of the residents want Ruth to tell her friends to use the service elevator. Ruth refuses and slams the phone down. She never discusses it with her mother again.



# Chapters 9 & 10

## Chapters 9 & 10 Summary and Analysis

In *The Philosopher of the Table*, Ruth goes to work at L'Escargot, the most expensive restaurant in Ann Arbor. The newly opened restaurant is decorated with antiques and fine china. The owner, Maurice, is a pretentious man who wears pancake makeup and understands little about the financial aspects of the restaurant business. Ruth has a crush on brooding waiter Alan Jones, a fellow student. He ignores her but the lecherous German Sous Chef Rolf does not. He tries to seduce Ruth by giving her a tenderloin, stolen from the restaurant by the arrogant French Executive Chef.

Henry, an African-American waiter, teaches Ruth the art of working in a fine dining restaurant, tossing Caesar salads and flaming crepes table-side. He teaches Ruth that a restaurant is a war between the kitchen and the customers, with the waiter always in the middle and always taking the blame. Henry encourages Ruth to invent a pathetic life story that will tug at patron's heartstrings. She pretends to be an impoverished French exchange student, complete with a bad accent. Marielle, an older French waitress, resents Ruth's ruse until she learns that Ruth speaks French fluently. Then, they become close friends and Marielle teaches her even more than Henry has taught her.

The restaurant is doomed by the Chef's thefts, overly high prices for fancy French cuisine, and Maurice's complete lack of business sense. There are no repeat customers. When the restaurant finally goes under, Henry and Marielle decide to open their own place, serving upscale comfort food at more affordable prices.

In Tunis, Ruth and Sarafina are drifting further apart, as Sarafina wants nothing to do with any white friends. Ruth never wants college to end, partly because she realizes that her degree in Sociology does not qualify her for any job. Ruth moves in with an exotic but considerate new female roommate named Pat. When Sarafina suggests the two take a trip together during their last summer in college, Ruth jumps at the chance. They agree to go to Tunisia in Northern Africa, because it is cheap. Ruth does not realize it at first, but she would have gone anywhere to keep from losing her friendship with Sarafina.

The ferry from Naples to Tunisia is grubby and frightening. The two girls stumble off the boat into a forbidding city. As they walk towards the downtown area, an ominous black car follows them. They glance at the car discretely, noting two young men inside. The youths offer them a ride, but the girls reply primly that they do not accept rides from strangers. Instead, the two young men drive very slowly, allowing the girls to follow them on foot. It is still frightening when the men lead them to a hotel and negotiate the price. Reluctantly, the girls accepted—the hotel is far nicer, and far cheaper, than the other hotels where they have stayed. The two young men are tall, dashing Taeb and short, bookish Nouredine. In spite of themselves, both girls are instantly attracted to Taeb.



Reluctantly, the young women agree to have tea with Taeb and Nouredine. The men take them through a round-about route to the crowded, shabby souk. Just as the girls are afraid that they are being kidnapped, they walk into a tiny restaurant. Sarafina whispers that it looks like an opium den. After tea, the two young men argue violently with each other in Arabic. They agree to take the girls to dinner at a small restaurant that night, and to Nouredine's home for dinner the following night. The girls seem to have little choice in the matter, although they are still a little afraid of the two dark men's attention and courtesy.

Nouredine's mother prepares a sumptuous feast for the four. Sarafina begins to flirt with Taeb, who is interested but reserved. Nouredine treats Ruth like a sister. The two young women remain in Tunis much longer than planned, going to dinner every night with Taeb and Nouredine. One day while the group is sightseeing, the girls are left on their own. They walk to a cafe in a small town, sit at an outdoor table, and order wine. The restaurant closes, and no one ever brings their order. Taeb patiently explains that Arab women do not sit outside drinking in public in a small town. Sarafina protests that they are not Arab. Suddenly, both girls realize that Taeb believes Sarafina is Arab, and hopes to marry her.

To discourage Taeb, the two young women travel on to Algiers, determined to spend the rest of their vacation alone. A young man meets them at the airport in Algiers and explains that he will be their escort because he is a friend of Nouredine's.



# Chapters 11 & 12

## Chapters 11 & 12 Summary and Analysis

In *Love Story*, when Ruth finishes college, her mother wants her to move back to New York. Ruth refuses, and blurts out that she wants to go to graduate school. Her parents refuse to pay for it, so Ruth gets a job as a lunch waitress at the Sheraton and a cheap apartment in a bad neighborhood. Her next-door neighbor beats his wife every night. One night, Ruth calls the cops and flees, afraid that the neighbor will retaliate against her. She moves back in with her tall, exotic friend Pat. Soon Pat moves to New York and Ruth is left alone, depressed in the apartment.

One evening a tall, lean young man named Doug knocks on the door, looking for Pat. Ruth invites him to dinner. He is a sculptor and a mechanical genius, able to fix anything. Ruth invites Doug back the next night and cooks one of her father's favorite dishes, sauerbraten with pancakes and applesauce. She bakes brownies and they stay up all night eating and talking. The next day, Ruth makes chocolate chip cookies and wiener schnitzel. Doug never leaves. Ruth continues to study Art History and to cook.

The young lovers meet each other's families. Doug has little in common with his mother and stepfather, but instantly bonds with Ruth's Dad. Ruth realizes that she has been cooking all of her Dad's favorite dishes for Doug. Through Doug, Ruth learns to see her father as a person, rather than an appendage of her neurotic mother. Ruth learns that, as a boy, her father flew with early aviator Wilbur Wright and was a draft dodger. Sadly, Ruth realizes that her father wanted a son, not a daughter like her. By falling in love with Doug, she has given each of them what they most desire—a father for Doug, a son for Dad.

In *Eyesight for the Blind*, Doug and Ruth return all their wedding gifts, and use the cash for an extended honeymoon in Europe. In Crete, they visit their favorite professor from grad school, Milton. He is a charming, hospitable brooding artist always pining after an unavailable woman. Milton treats the young couple to many wonderful meals. When Ruth cooks for everyone, Milton remarks that cooking can be art. Ruth disagrees with him, but is secretly beginning to believe it. Eventually Doug and Ruth travel on to Madrid. They meet Milton again in Rome for Christmas. The two celebrate by spending their last cash on a silver St. Christopher medal to put in Milton's Christmas stocking.



# Chapters 13 & 14

## Chapters 13 & 14 Summary and Analysis

In Paradise Loft, after graduate school and the trip to Europe, Ruth and Doug move to New York with only \$10 in their pockets and the address of Pat, Ruth's old roommate. Pat has dubbed her rented apartment the Paradise Loft. "In 1971 lower Manhattan was a cook's paradise," according to Ruth, who spends her days cooking. She buys specialty ingredients of the highest quality in Chinatown, the Italian section or the Jewish quarter, all near the loft. Ruth commissions Mr. Izzy to make a quilt for just \$35. Although his workmanship is of the highest quality, Mr. Izzy is slow. Each week for a year he tells her that the quilt will be ready — next week. Ruth does not really mind, because she enjoys visiting Mr. Izzy, a lonely man who serves as her guide to the neighborhood.

Doug, Pat and Ruth are invited to a party at Andy Warhol's studio. The famous artist is making a movie, and Pat hopes to design the costumes. At the party, the trio meet a woman named Jerry, whom Ruth describes as a Superstar. Beautiful but dim-witted, Jerry befriends Pat, and visits the loft often. She even convinces Ruth to teach her to cook. Jerry is sure that if she learns to make lemon meringue pie, her boyfriend Rick will propose. Jerry promises to bring Andy Warhol to see Pat's costumes, if Ruth will help her bake the pie. On the appointed day, Pat was bitterly disappointed to learn that Andy Warhol is out of town. Still, Ruth helps Jerry bake the pie. The Superstar takes it to her boyfriend Rick, only to find him in bed with another woman. Mr. Izzy says it serves her right for not keeping her word about showing Pat's costumes to Andy Warhol. Then he finally produces the quilt he promised Ruth a year ago.

Ruth's neurotic mother is driving her crazy. Mom insists on spending every available minute with Doug and Ruth, throwing tantrums and trying to run their lives. When Ruth starts having panic attacks on the subway, Pat advises that they move as far away as possible. Dad reluctantly agrees, although he will miss Doug greatly. They move to Berkeley, California and share a rented house with friend Nick and his girlfriend Martha. Eventually, the four manage to buy a house together. Everyone lies about his or her income. Ruth says she is an author, even though she writes term papers for students. Doug says he is a carpenter, although he has not found work yet. Together with Nick and Martha, they buy a 17-room Queen Anne house on Channing Way. The payments are only \$45 per person. Soon, more friends move in and they are a full-fledged commune, raising their own food and baking their own bread. Ruth cooks dinner for everyone every night.

Arrogant, idealistic Nick becomes the conscience of Channing Way. Annoying and superior, he forces everyone to give up sugar, white bread and even coffee. On Thanksgiving, he forbids them from eating turkey. Instead, they retrieve free food from dumpsters behind grocery stores. Suddenly, marshmallows, cookies, white bread and junk food are okay, as long as they are free. When Ruth retrieves a chunk of meat from



the dumpster, she remembers her mother feeding everyone spoiled food. The group celebrates a sad vegetarian Thanksgiving. Late that night, Nick returns from an errand with an enormous turkey in a box. Everyone is wise enough not to ask if it came out of the dumpster.





# Chapters 15 & 16

## Chapters 15 & 16 Summary and Analysis

In *The Swallow*, on a visit to California, Mom tells Ruth that if all she is going to do is cook, she might as well open a restaurant. Mom suggests that her hippie daughter go to France for cooking lessons. Ruth knows that Mom hopes she will return thin and chic. Instead, Ruth joins *The Swallow*, a collectively owned restaurant. Every employee is an owner and none of them can agree on anything. Each day, every employee cooks whatever he or she feels like making that day. At first they do not want to accept Ruth into the collective, because she is from New York, is married and has a master's degree. However, when they learn that she lives in a commune, they agree to an unpaid trial.

Ruth works hard under chaotic conditions, but loves it. After the trial period, everyone votes and Ruth is accepted as a member. Ruth befriends a psychotic homeless woman, Rachel Rubenstein, who hangs around the restaurant, annoying the customers and staff. In some ways Rachel Rubenstein reminds Ruth of her mother because they are both unstable women who disturb those around them. Rachel is a major problem, but no one can figure out how to get rid of her. Finally, the other members of the collective suggest that if Ruth finds another job, Rachel will leave.

In *Another Party*, Doug gets his big break as an artist, and is invited to show his sculpture at Artpark near Buffalo, New York. As an afterthought, Ruth is invited as chef-in-residence. Her cooking lessons are a big hit and a nice newspaper story is written about the gypsy chef. However, Ruth's success is brief. Mother is planning an elaborate 100th birthday party for Aunt Birdie. After frantic calls from Dad and Mother, Ruth reluctantly agrees to help with the party. She cannot face the prospect of Mother making more guests sick. When Ruth arrives, the house is in chaos. Mother has emptied every closet, setting the items on the lawn. The sewer has backed up into both bathtubs and the dishwasher. The landscaping is torn apart.

For the first time, Ruth refuses to play along with Mother's game. One night, she has a peaceful dream about the party, with Ruth chasing Mother/Rachel Rubenstein out of the kitchen. The next morning, Ruth plans the menu based on the items served at Aunt Birdie's wedding decades ago. She orders a cake and has the fish market poach whole salmon to serve with Ruth's lobster sauce. Ruth will serve fried oysters and salad. She calls plumbers and gardeners and clears out the yard by giving everything to charity. Infuriated not to be creating chaos, Mother disinherits Ruth five times in the next seven days. Ruth ignores her and orders rental tables, chairs and champagne. The party goes off without a hitch.

For the first time, Ruth understands Alice's remark that her father married two of them—meaning two crazy women. She remembers her father telling her that Aunt Birdie did not prepare his first wife for the real world. Ruth reflects that however they might have failed Hortense, Alice and Aunt Birdie prepared Ruth perfectly for her real life—being a

chef. The next day, driving Ruth to the train, her mother reflects that the party was almost as nice as the one Mother threw for Bob, all those years ago. Mother still denies that her food made anyone sick.



# Chapters 17 & 18

## Chapters 17 & 18 Summary and Analysis

In *Keep Tasting*, Ruth returns to Berkeley determined to become a caterer—but fate intervenes. A regular customer at *The Swallow* asks her to be the restaurant critic for his new magazine in San Francisco. With all of her experience cooking and working in restaurants, Ruth is amazed how easy it is. The editor gushes that Ruth is born to do this. Still, Ruth thinks that a restaurant critic should know something about wine. One day she stumbles into Kermit Lynch's wine shop. He recommends wines personally selected from small vineyards in France. Ruth accompanies him on his next buying trip to France, and sees for herself how heartbroken the vintners are when Kermit does not buy their wine.

In *the Bridge*, Ruth becomes a successful food writer, with articles published in magazines in San Francisco and New York. Yet, her mother constantly nags her about doing something worthwhile with her life. She begins having panic attacks again and is often too frightened to drive. At a party for James Beard in San Francisco, Ruth meets cookbook author Marion Cunningham. She learns that Cunningham has overcome alcoholism and phobias and reinvented herself in middle age. With Cunningham as inspiration, Ruth conquered her own phobias, driving across the San Francisco Bay Bridge to enjoy a fabulous meal in a Chinese restaurant.



# Characters

## Ruth Reichl

The narrative follows the life of Ruth Reichl from a precocious three-year-old to a well-established food writer. Ruth shows remarkable resilience and equanimity during an extremely trying childhood. Ruth's mother is mentally ill, but does not even try to be a good parent during her lucid phases. Her father is totally ineffectual and emotionally unavailable, focusing entirely on his wife. Ruth's mother abandons her repeatedly, first by taking a month-long trip to Europe and leaving Ruth with her bored grandmother, who has no idea how to care for a six-year-old. Fortunately, the grandmother dumps Ruth on Aunt Birdie, who provides the secure, loving atmosphere a child needs to thrive.

When Ruth casually complements her mother's command of the French language, Mom takes the opportunity to dump her daughter in a French-speaking school in Montreal. Ruth is completely unable to communicate with the students and teachers and desperately lonely. Showing remarkable adaptability, Ruth eventually learns French and makes friends at the school. After three years of school in Montreal, Ruth wants to have an American high school experience. She returns to the United States but her parents have lost the habit of acting like parents. They dump Ruth in a house in Connecticut to fend for herself while her parents live in New York City, visiting Ruth on the weekends. Although Ruth cuts classes sometimes and hangs out with disreputable friends, she survives the experience without major damage.

## Miriam Reichl

Ruth's mother is neurotic and is later diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She is bohemian, wears no makeup and refuses to dye her gray hair. She is intelligent and has a PhD. Ruth's mother has lots of time and energy but not a lot to do. She is politely fired from several jobs as a magazine editor. The museum asks her to stop volunteering after she gives a risqué lecture on Picasso's personal life. She cooks for parties and brings home exotic foods like sea urchins and cactus fruit. One day she has workmen haul a huge, dead birch tree into the family's eleventh-floor apartment, insisting they can cut it to fit under the ceiling and festoon it with seasonal decorations.

Ruth's mother is given to grand passions and flights of fancy, as when she suddenly decides to abandon her daughter at a boarding school to learn French. Her plans often take on a life of their own, as when she throws a huge engagement party for her son that becomes a charity benefit reported on in the newspaper. Throughout her life, Ruth's mother must be the center of attention. She frequently reinforces this by being late and other diva-like behavior.



## Dad

An intellectual from a wealthy German-Jewish family, Dad migrates to the U.S. in the 1920s and still has a German accent. He is tall, suave and elegant. Unfortunately, all his time and emotional energy is focused on his wife and his daughter is left to her own devices. Dad is also severely disappointed that he does not have a son, a fact that is underscored for Ruth when she brings her future husband Doug home and the two men instantly bond.

## Aunt Birdie

Aunt Birdie is not actually related to Ruth. She is the mother of Father's first wife, Hortense. Birdie, deprived of grandchildren by her own daughter's mental illness, simply shows up at the hospital the day Ruth is born and introduces herself to Ruth's mother, Miriam. Aunt Birdie offers her services as a grandmother, and Ruth's mother is happy for any help she can get. Birdie is just 4'8" tall and over eighty years old, but has a big influence over Ruth's life. For one thing, Birdie employs a cook named Alice, who teaches the young Ruth how to prepare many dishes. Aunt Birdie herself can cook only one dish, a delicious potato salad that is a favorite of Ruth's father.

Aunt Birdie is the doting adult that every child needs in their life, to provide unconditional love. When Ruth's grandmother from Cleveland abandons her while her parents are in Europe, Ruth rejoices at the prospect of spending an entire month with Aunt Birdie. Ruth finds comfort and solace in Aunt Birdie's kitchen and develops a lifelong interest in cooking.

## Bob

Although Ruth refers to Bob as her brother, the fact that he has a different father makes him her half brother. Thirteen years older than Ruth, Bob is a factor primarily because Ruth's mother plans a huge benefit party to celebrate his engagement, almost poisoning hundreds of guests.

## Alice

Alice is the black cook from Barbados employed by Aunt Birdie, but in fact she is a member of Ruth's extended family, not merely an employee. Aunt Birdie lives alone, with Alice coming in to cook and clean for her every day, as she has since Aunt Birdie's marriage some sixty years before. Aunt Birdie and Alice cheerfully recount the story of how Aunt Birdie tried to fire Alice after the family lost all their money during the depression. Alice refused to leave, telling Aunt Birdie that she could pay her in future years, when she had the money. Alice saves her money to buy a little cottage in Barbados for her retirement. When Aunt Birdie finally inherits money (after her last male relative dies) she buys the cottage for Alice. Neither of the two elderly women is really



happy, because they miss the friendship of the other. Alice's kitchen is a haven for young Ruth. There, she puts on an apron and learns to make apple dumplings and other delicious treats.

## **Mrs. Peavey**

One day when Mother has a fancy dinner party, Mrs. Peavey accidentally drops the Beef Wellington on the dining room floor. She immediately tells Mother that she will go into the the kitchen and get the other one. Back in the kitchen, Mrs. Peavey uses scraps of extra dough to cover the cracks in the Beef Wellington, and proudly takes it back into the dining room. Later, Mrs. Peavey shares her three important life lessons with Ruth. First, do not let other people tell you how to live your life. Second, take care of yourself. Third, always make extra pastry for the Beef Wellington.

## **James Beard**

Ruth attends a party in San Francisco to honor renowned cookbook author James Beard. Although the great man is cold to her, she meets Marion Cunningham there.

## **Marion Cunningham**

Ruth meets cookbook author Cunningham at a party in San Francisco and the two soon become good friends. With Cunningham's help, Ruth overcomes her anxiety disorder and panic attacks.

## **Doug**

Ruth meets her future husband Doug when he stops by her apartment, looking for her roommate. When Ruth introduces Doug to her father, she realizes she has given each of them what they always wanted. They become close friends and Ruth's father has the son he has always wanted.

## **Sarafina**

When Ruth goes away to college, her roommate is the beautiful, exotic Sarafina. The two girls quickly bond, a connection that is threatened when Sarafina learns from her adopted parents that she is half African American. Sarafina rejects Ruth to hang out with black friends, but the two eventually bond again over a trip to northern Africa.



# Objects/Places

## New York Apartment

Ruth's parents have an apartment in New York City, the site of her earliest memories. The apartment is decorated in Mother's flamboyant style, including a huge bare tree festooned with seasonal decorations in one corner. The decor is a jumble of Mother clashing styles including Danish modern furniture and antiques.

## Aunt Birdie's Apartment

Ruth's elderly foster grandmother, called "Aunt Birdie", provides a refuge for the young girl in her apartment.

## Europe

Ruth travels to Europe several times with her parents. During one of the earlier trips, she makes the mistake of admiring her mother's ability to speak French.

## New York

Although Ruth grows up in New York, when she returns during the summer after college, she sees a new side of the city, working with underprivileged single mothers.

## Food

Food is not just sustenance for Ruth, it becomes a major theme of her life. It provides entertainment and solace in a chaotic childhood. Some of her favorites include brownies, raspberry tart and lemon souffle.

## Montreal

Ruth's mother sends her to a boarding school in Montreal where only French is spoken.

## Ann Arbor

Ruth attends the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor partly to escape New York and her controlling mother.



## **The House in Connecticut**

When Ruth leaves boarding school, her parents enroll her in school in Connecticut, where they have a house in the suburbs. Soon they abandon here there, while they live in an apartment in the city.

## **Berkeley**

With husband Doug, Ruth lives the hippie lifestyle in Berkeley, California. The couple buy a 17-room house with some friends and it quickly becomes a commune.

## **The Swallow**

The Swallow is a cooperative restaurant in Berkeley, where every employee is also a co-owner. The restaurant suffers from having too many bosses. Menus are not coordinated—every chef simply cooks whatever he or she feels like each day. Customers never know what to expect from one day to the next.

## **L'Escargot**

L'Escargot serves French cuisine and is the most expensive and fanciest restaurant in Ann Arbor. Ruth learns much about fine dining and food, working there as a college student.

## **Tunis**

Ruth bonds with her old friend Seraphina on a trip to this northern African country.

## **France**

France is an important location for Ruth. She visits as a child on a trip to Europe with her parents. Later, she works for a summer as a camp counselor on an island off the coast. She returns to France as an adult, traveling with a wine merchant to learn more about grapes and wine.





# Themes

## Food and Cooking

Food is the underlying theme in *Tender at the Bone*. It ties the various aspects of Ruth's life together, from the sumptuous menu she explores with Aunt Birdie, to cooking her father's favorite dishes for her future husband, Doug. As a small child, Ruth is horrified at her mother's poor sanitation practices. Ruth discovers that she likes people who like to eat and those who like to cook. Yet, she also learns that being fond of food is dangerous. Those who enjoy food the most are the ones most likely to be killed by her mother's tainted dishes.

Ruth's history is primarily a saga of the food she learns to cook, and the people who help her. From the delicious smoked meats in the deli near her school in French-speaking Canada, to deviled eggs at a party for renowned chef James Beard, food is the story of Ruth's life. Overweight and not especially beautiful, cooking is the way that Ruth handles awkward social situations. In high school, she cooks for the many friends who cut class to hang out at her house. In college, she cooks for classmates whenever she can afford to. When she meets Doug, she woos him by cooking dinner every night, including her favorite brownies. At the commune, Ruth cooks dinner for dozens of people every night.

Even though she has no formal training in culinary arts, food is intertwined in Ruth's destiny. It was inevitable that she would run a restaurant, be a caterer or be involved with food somehow. When Ruth is offered a job as restaurant critic, it perfectly combines her talents for writing and cooking. Eventually, she becomes restaurant critic for a New York newspaper, then editor for *Gourmet* magazine.

## Mentally Ill Women

Mother's erratic moods, frequent depressions and manic periods are symptoms of her bipolar disorder, also called manic depression. Although she takes lithium to control her mental illness, Ruth's neurotic, manipulative mother thrives on tantrums and chaos. She constantly puts Ruth down, asking when she will do something worthwhile with her life. This conflict resonates in Ruth's life as she develops panic attacks and phobias. Only through accepting her life as the best use of her talents is Ruth able to overcome her phobias.

Ruth's father has an affinity for mentally ill women and secretly enjoys the excitement of constant tantrums and chaos. He divorces his first wife, Aunt Birdie's daughter, after she is confined to a mental hospital. Then he marries Ruth's mother, who also suffers from mental illness. Dad blames Aunt Birdie for her daughter's mental illness, saying that she did not prepare her artistic daughter for life in the real world. Yet, he fails to recognize that he keeps picking crazy women and lets them run his life.



Like her father, Ruth seems to attract other mentally unstable women. When she is part-owner of the collective restaurant The Swallow, Ruth pities a psychotic homeless woman named Rachel Rubenstein and befriends her. Rachel quickly becomes an annoyance, driving customers away from the restaurant. Still, Ruth cannot bring herself to reject Rachel. Ruth's unconscious affinity for mentally ill women demonstrates her internal conflicts about her mother. While Ruth moves to California to get away from her mother, in some ways she recreates that relationship with Rachel.

## Extended Family

Ruth survives a tumultuous childhood with a mentally ill mother and an inattentive father mostly because she has a varied and supportive extended family. Her half-brother Bob, although more than ten years older than Ruth, provides moral support in her battles against a chaotic childhood. Ruth's Aunt Birdie is a refuge of sanity in the storm of her mother's chaos, regularly scooping Ruth up and pampering her with hot fudge sundaes. Even the alcoholic family cook Mrs. Peavey takes Ruth under her wing. Aunt Birdie's cook Alice is like a fourth grandmother to Ruth. With Aunt Birdie and Alice, Ruth learns to find solace in the rhythms of the kitchen, of preparing and eating food—a solace that lasts her whole life.

Later, abandoned by her parents, Ruth uses food and cooking to forge connections with friends who become her extended family. At boarding school, she becomes friends with the wealthy family of a French Ambassador, bonding over gourmet meals. In high school, living alone in Connecticut while her parents remain in New York, Ruth cooks for her friends. She repeats this bonding tactic in college and later when she lives in a commune and runs a restaurant. Eventually the world of cookbook authors and food writers becomes Ruth's extended family, filling in for her emotionally unavailable parents.



# Style

## Perspective

The narrative is entirely from Ruth's point of view. Early chapters focus on her perceptions and memories as a very young child. As Ruth matures, so do her perceptions, especially those regarding her very difficult, troubled mother. Reichl's love of gourmet food and her preoccupation with food resonates through every page. She lovingly describes meals and even single bites of food with total recall, decades later. The entrées and desserts shared with her future husband Doug are far more important than his appearance. The couple's conversation is not mentioned at all, but every detail of those pivotal first meals cooked by Ruth is described.

Ruth's mother is mentally ill and her father is emotionally absent, completely preoccupied with Mother's antics. Ruth does not try to hide those facts, but she also does not indulge feelings of deprivation or emotional neediness. Clearly, she regards her dysfunctional family life as an important contributing factor in making her a unique and talented individual. She does not gloss over her family's faults, but she also does not exaggerate them for drama or to gain the reader's sympathy.

## Tone

The tone is subjective, with Ruth Reichl's opinions shining through. Reichl does not attempt to be even-handed or to tell both sides of the story. This is her memoir and it focuses on her point of view. Many parts of the book are humorous, including descriptions of Mother's preparations for the ill-fated engagement party. Many of the scenes from the collectively-owned restaurant The Swallow are hilarious, as cooks fling accusations about making gallons of unsalable Indonesian Fish Soup at each other. Ruth's love of Aunt Birdie and her cook Alice shines through in descriptions of the women and the dishes they cook in the New York apartment kitchen. It is doubtful that anyone could be as kind, caring and wonderful as these two women seem to the young Ruth. Yet, their personalities contrast perfectly with Ruth's neurotic, irrational, unpredictable mother.

Many authors would be tempted to inflate the negative emotional impact of the mother's insanity and the resulting chaotic childhood. Yet Reichl never invites the reader's pity. Ruth's remarkable resilience and emotional maturity seem the only sane response to an insane childhood. Despite difficult circumstances, Reichl resists the urge to portray herself as a martyr or hero. She also refrains from blaming her father for not taking a more active role in caring for his only child, instead focusing all of his attention on his dramatic wife. In not trying to always show herself in a positive light, Reichl comes across as balanced, sane and understanding. Reichl is able to find the good in every character, even detailing how the family's alcoholic cook, Mrs. Peavey, contributes to the little girl's happiness and sparks her fascination with cooking.

## Structure

The structure of the memoir is unique. The narrative is bookended by detailed accounts of two parties—the engagement party that Mom throws for Bob and the 100th birthday party that Ruth prepares for Aunt Birdie, despite her mother's help. The first party is a disaster; Mother buys food on clearance and allows it to spoil before serving it to her guests. The fiancée and her family get food poisoning. Mom also commits several social blunders, making the party into a benefit and charging the guests of honor admission to attend. The party is a formative event in young Ruth's life, since it teaches her that food can be dangerous and she must protect people who share her love for it.

The second party is the climax of the book, when Ruth leaves a prestigious engagement as chef-in-residence to help her mother prepare a party for Aunt Birdie's birthday. Ruth takes charge of the event over her mother's objections and creates a simple, delicious menu served in elegant surroundings. This even is highly symbolic because it sets the course for the rest of Ruth's life. She refuses to be controlled by her mentally-ill mother. Instead, Ruth takes control of her own destiny and emotional well-being. The party is delightful, a fitting tribute to Aunt Birdie, and launches Ruth's happy, successful life.

Each of the 18 chapters within the book is a narrative of a pivotal event in Ruth's life. Since food is so important to Ruth, each chapter also contains a recipe that relates to the event or the place in the story. This recipe is always in the middle of the chapter and illustrates a type of cuisine that is an integral part of that location. When Ruth spends a summer working at a camp on an island off the coast of France, she includes a recipe for Raspberry Tart that she learns from one of the island's natives. In the chapter where she meets her future husband Doug, Ruth includes the recipe for Wiener Schnitzel that she prepared for him. This structure underscores the fact that food is as important as people and places in Ruth's life.



## Quotes

"This taught me many things. The first was that food could be dangerous, especially to those who loved it," (p. 5).

"Mrs. Peavey straightened up and looked directly at me. 'I am not your mother,' she said succinctly. 'I do not turn on the gas and then go into the living room looking for matches. Normal people do not set themselves on fire,'" (p. 43).

"Disaster was always simmering just below the surface and we cherished every peaceful moment with my mother. By then we were starting to suspect the truth, that my mother was a manic-depressive, but neither of us knew what to do about it. When lithium entered our lives a few years later we were deeply grateful: up to then we both believed, in our secret hearts, that my mothers' moods were our personal responsibility," (p. 5).

"I yearned for romance and dreamed of candlelight suppers, but I didn't have the nerve to invite Tommy Calfano to dinner. It was so much easier to say, 'Why doesn't everybody come over to my house?'" (p. 74).

"She came barging into the dormitory with a big smile that fell apart when she saw Serafina. [Mom] struggled for control, gathered her face together, and held out her hand," (p. 107).

"Mac opened a whole new world to me. My parents had taken me traveling abroad, but now I discovered another country here at home," (p. 120).

"I went to work at L'Escargot because of Alan Jones. I stayed because of everybody else," (p. 134).

"'Attention!' said Noureddine, reaching for one of the pastries. 'This is the national food of Tunisia. I will now show you how to eat it,'" (p. 157).

"The most visible people on our block were bums, car thieves and Puerto Rican grandmothers," (p. 200).

"'This is not my real life,' I repeated to myself, over and over like a mantra. 'Only four more days. I can take it.' My mother did everything to create chaos but for the first time in my life I refused to join her," (p. 253).

"Because I had just realized that, whatever they may have done to Hortense, Alice and Aunt Birdie had done extremely well by me. They had prepared me for my world," (p. 255).

"I thought of my mother. And then, suddenly, she seemed very far away. The bridge was strong. Doug was waiting on the other side," (p. 282).



## Topics for Discussion

Ruth survives a very difficult childhood with a mentally ill mother and an emotionally distant father. Is she scarred for life or does she end up being a stable, productive person?

What are some of Ruth's favorite recipes that are featured in the book?

Why does Ruth try to prevent her mother's guests from eating certain foods?

Ruth's mother often prepares and serves spoiled food. Instead of growing up hating food, Ruth becomes very interested in cooking and eating great food. Would other people in a similar situation have the same reaction? Why or why not?

What personality traits enable Ruth to survive a very strange childhood?

What members of her extended family help Ruth overcome her mother's insanity and her father's benign neglect?

When Ruth is initially considered as a member of the collective restaurant The Swallow, some members want to reject her because she has a master's degree, is from New York and is married. Is it fair to judge a person based on characteristics like this? Would it have been fair of them to reject Ruth if she was not well educated, was from California and was single?

Who are some members of Ruth's extended family who help her learn to cook? What dishes does she prepare with them?

As an adult, is Ruth angry or bitter about her dysfunctional childhood or does she mostly accept it?

If Ruth had not become a food writer, what other career might she have pursued?

Even after Ruth is a well-established restaurant critic and food writer, her mother keeps asking when she is going to "do something worthwhile with her life." Is this helpful or destructive?