

THE FIRST ACTRESS

C.W. GORTNER



BOOK CLUB KIT

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I'm so excited to share *THE FIRST ACTRESS* with you. I was introduced to Sarah Bernhardt in my childhood, when my grandmother chided me for being too dramatic by saying "don't be a Bernhardt." This was in Spain, where I grew up, so Sarah's fame had extended that far, almost a century after her death.

Born into the waning days of the Second Empire, Sarah's mother was a courtesan who expected her daughter to follow in her footsteps. At this time in history, particularly in Paris, courtesans abounded because so many women, deprived of education and means to make a living, found themselves turning to the world's oldest trade. Courtesans weren't only skilled in carnal arts; they were also consummate hostesses, their social expertise ensuring the company of loyal suitors to support them. Sarah, however, wanted no part of it. Caged by her mother's demands, she rebelliously went into acting—a profession that lacked the high gloss of fame we know today, being rarely profitable and tainted by a prejudice that excluded most actors from acceptance in wealthy society.

Acting wasn't initially a vocation for Sarah. It was her means of escape. What she discovered performing on stage would change her and her world forever.

Researching Sarah's rise to become the world's first international celebrity and the highest paid actress of her day was a joy. In her tumultuous life, she witnessed the downfall of the last Napoleonic empire and survived the brutal siege on Paris. She bore a son out of wedlock, nursed wounded soldiers, adopted wild animals as pets, recited poetry from a coffin, and broke all the rules imposed on women in her quest to succeed. Her motto was "Against all odds" and she personified it in her determination to be more than anyone expected of her.

I hope you enjoy reading about Sarah Bernhardt as much as I enjoyed bringing her to life. She inspired and challenged me, revealing that while much has changed in our 21st century, one thing remains the same: to be who we want to be, we must always believe in ourselves.

If you wish to select *THE FIRST ACTRESS* for your book group, I am available for Facetime or Zoom chats. Please contact me via www.cwgortner.com

With my fond regards,
C.W. Gortner

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sarah's schoolmate says of Sarah's mother "To live as you please and make your own fortune: it's a freedom that of all women, only a courtesan enjoys." Considering the times, do you agree with that statement? What options seem available to women? What kind of women role models does Sarah have in her life?
2. Discuss Sarah's faith and her draw to Catholicism. Why do you think she wants to be baptized? What do you think of Mère Sophie?
3. Mère Sophie suggests *quand même*—despite the odds—should be Sarah's motto. How many examples of *quand même* in Sarah's life can you pull from the book?
4. Discuss Sarah's relationship with her mother. Why do you think it is so complicated? What does each represent for the other? How does her mother shape—directly or indirectly—Sarah's life and choices?
5. Mère Sophie reminds a young Sarah to "choose the life you want." Do you think, by the book's end, Sarah has done that?
6. Why do you think Sarah feels such a pull to the stage? Have you had a similar experience with something in your life?
7. Name the people in Sarah's life who seem to have a hand in her fate. Do you think her success is based on her talent alone? Or do you think she was fortunate to have help?
8. Why do you think Sarah is determined to have her child? What kind of a mother do you think she becomes?
9. Do you think Sarah is a woman ahead of her time? Discuss her impact on culture—in her art, in Parisian society, and even Hollywood.
10. If Sarah Bernhardt were alive today, whom might she be compared to? Do any modern-day famous actresses come to mind?

SARAH BERNHARDT CAKES (SARAH BERNHARDT-KAGER) (DANISH)

Ready in: 30 mins

Serves: 12

Ingredients

1 egg white
½ cup sugar
1 (2½ ounce) package blanched slivered almonds, pulverized in a blender
1 tablespoon cornstarch
1 teaspoon almond extract

Topping and Decoration

1 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips (6 ounces)
⅓ cup butter
1 egg
1 teaspoon grated fresh lemon rind
1 teaspoon sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
12 blanched almonds

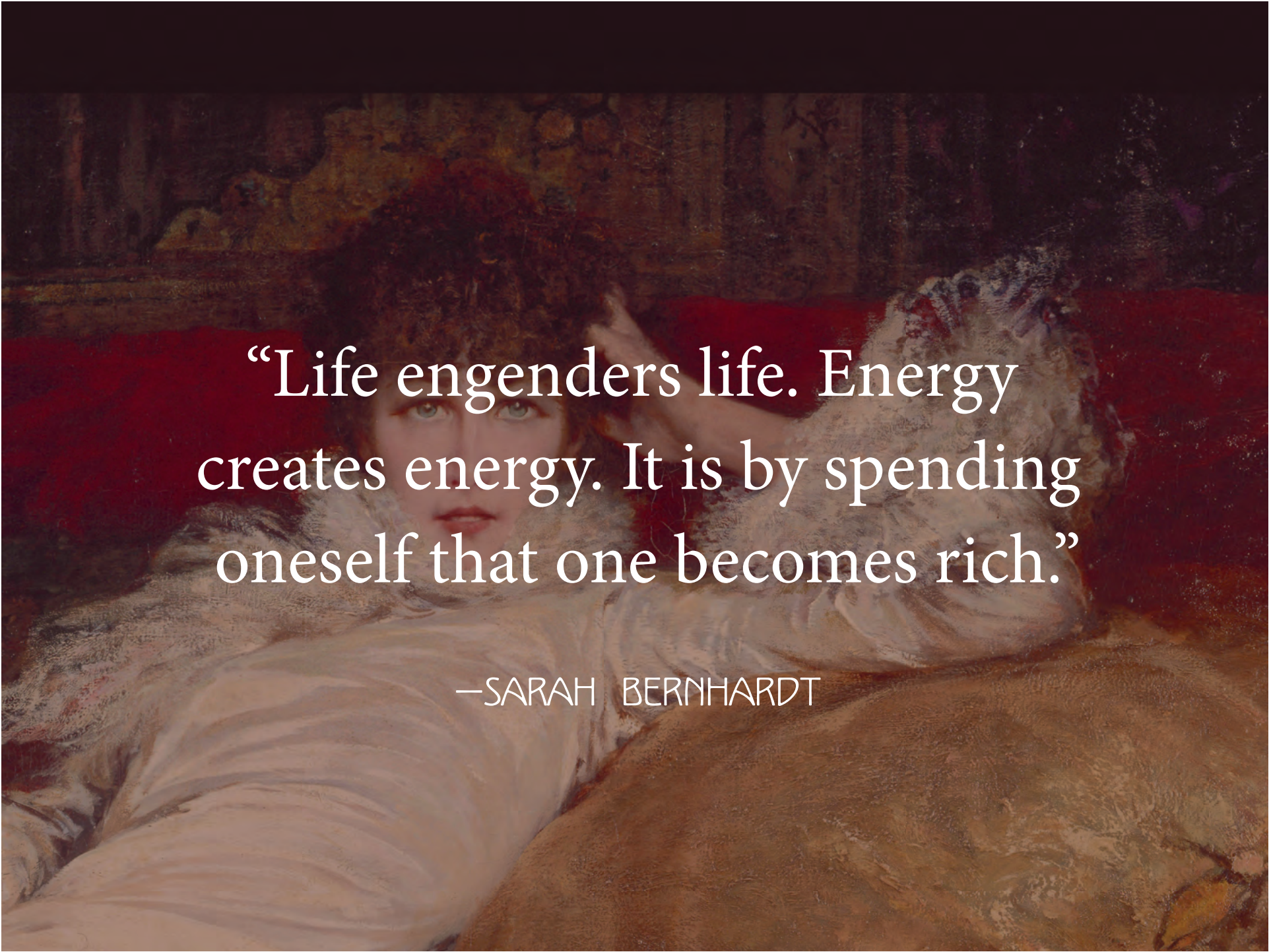
Directions

1. Cover a baking sheet with parchment paper or grease and flour it.
2. Preheat oven to 350°F.
3. In a large bowl, whisk the egg white until foamy; add the sugar, and beat until mixture holds soft peaks.
4. Fold in the pulverized almonds, cornstarch, and almond extract.



5. Spoon into 12 mounds evenly spaced on the prepared baking sheet, allowing plenty of space between them.
6. Bake until top is dry and cakes are a creamy color, about 10 minutes.
7. Remove from sheet and cool on rack.
8. Melt ½ cup of the chocolate chips in a small bowl over hot water.
9. Melt the butter in another pan.
10. Whip the egg with the lemon rind, sugar, and vanilla until light and fluffy.
11. Mix the COOLED chocolate and butter together and add the egg mixture.
12. When this has thickened, spread it over the base of the cakes, allowing the mixture to set.
13. Melt the remaining chocolate and pour over the firm chocolate layer.
14. Decorate each cake with an almond.

Source: <https://www.food.com/recipe/sarah-bernhardt-cakes-sarah-bernhardt-kager-danish-88032>

A painting of Sarah Bernhardt in a white dress, reclining on a red cushion, with a quote overlaid.

“Life engenders life. Energy
creates energy. It is by spending
oneself that one becomes rich.”

—SARAH BERNHARDT