TENDER

AT THE BONE

RUTH REICHL
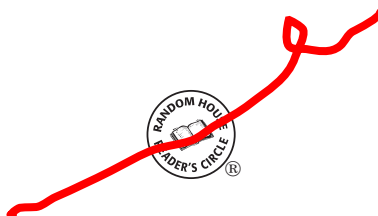
A ~~Reader's~~ Guide

1. The first two chapters of *Tender at the Bone* feature the culinary shortcomings of Ruth Reichl's relatives, particularly her mother. To what do you attribute prowess in the kitchen? Is the ability (or inability) to cook a reflection of other traits? Who are the most notorious cooks in your family?

2. Besides a perfect recipe for wiener schnitzel, what other gifts did Mrs. Peavey impart to Reichl?

3. How was Reichl affected by her three years at boarding school in Montreal? What, do you think, was her mother's true motivation in enrolling her there?

4. In the absence of parents, what role did cooking take while Reichl was a teenager? Why did feeding her friends become her primary joy? Does chapter 5, "Devil's Food," express unique or universal notions about adolescence and self-image?

5. In what way does the topic of mental illness shape the memoir overall, particularly the bipolar disorder that afflicted Reichl's mother? What do the book's images evoke regarding the psychology of indulgence and hunger?

6. How does the tenderness mentioned in the title manifest itself throughout the book? How do Reichl's sense of humor and her wry honesty play off each other?

7. What were Reichl's early impressions of France, including her summer on the Île d'Oléron? How did her casual immersions in French cooking shape her attitudes toward cuisine in general? How did they help her on the job at L'Escargot and when she later embarked on the vineyard tour?

8. At the end of chapter 7, Serafina writes, "I hope you find your Africa," in a note to Reichl. How was Reichl's view of humanity being transformed by Serafina and Mac?

9. Did traveling in North Africa bring Reichl closer to or farther from a sense of fulfillment? How did this travel experience compare with her previous ones?

10. As Reichl watched Doug bond with her parents (he even elicited previously unknown details about her father's life), she felt a new level of exasperation with her family. What models for marriage did she have? Was winter in Europe, with Milton often at the helm, a good antidote?

11. Reichl writes that in 1971 lower Manhattan was a cook's paradise. What did life on the Lower East Side, from the gefilte fish episode to Mr. Bergamini's veal breast recommendation, teach Reichl about how she would define a successful meal? Why was the Superstar so insistent that great cooking was a sure way to seduce a man? With Mr. Izzy T as navigator, what did the Superstar and Reichl both learn about themselves?

12. How does the idealism of Channing Way compare with the organic food movement of today? Have any of Nick's tenets become part of mainstream life in the twenty-first century?

13. The now-legendary Swallow Collective was as innovative in its management style as in its menus. What chapters in culinary history are captured in Reichl's recollections of working there?

14. *Tender at the Bone* ends with an image of Reichl conquering her bridge phobia while accompanied by Marion Cunningham, who says, "Nobody knows why some of us get better and others don't." What ingredients in Reichl's life may have helped her "get better" and achieve such tremendous success in the years that would follow this scene?

15. Food writing presents the unusual challenge of conveying distinct, intangible flavors through mere words. How would you characterize Reichl's approach to the task? Does she approach haute cuisine and comfort food in the same way? How would you have responded to her mother's comment that by developing a career as a food writer Reichl was "wasting her life"?

16. How would you characterize the recipes Reichl selected for *Tender at the Bone*? Do they possess a common "personality"? What recipes represent the most significant turning points in your life?