

BOOK CLUB KIT



“Beautifully written, deeply moving, and a fascinating social document.”

—NIGELLA LAWSON

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1** Initially Besha sought an “education in luxury,” but later she developed a passion for reviewing restaurants that had cultural significance at the local level, whether they were fine-dining restaurants or not. Discuss Besha’s transformations throughout the memoir.
- 2** Besha’s story subverts traditional expectations of who can be a food critic by highlighting the dominance of wealthy, older white men in those roles. Did her journey challenge your assumptions about food critics? Do you think these norms are changing? What, if anything, might the realm of food criticism lose or gain by becoming more inclusive and accessible to a broader array of people?
- 3** Besha recalls a time when restaurant workers were seen as being uneducated and unrefined. Has this view changed today? What factors influence our perceptions of food service workers?
- 4** Besha chose to remain anonymous — a viable option in an era before smartphones and social media. Do you think it’s still possible for a food critic to maintain anonymity? What might we have lost with the decline of anonymous critiques in the digital age?
- 5** Dining out offers more than just a meal — it’s an experience, a chance to connect with environments and people. What prompts you to leave home for a restaurant, and how do the atmosphere, company, and personal memories associated with a place contribute to your decision? Will you look at your dining experiences differently after reading *Hunger Like a Thirst*?
- 6** Did you learn anything surprising in the sections about the history of dining, such as the history of American restaurants (i.e. Waffle House)? Did you learn anything that changes what you think about the way we eat?
- 7** Besha and Ryan navigate the complexities of their relationship amid frequent moves and career changes. How do they balance their personal and professional lives, and in what ways do you see their journey influencing each other’s choices and compromises?
- 8** Besha reveals that her identity is deeply intertwined with food and her career — so much so, that without them, she might lose her sense of self. What key elements define your identity? Do any parts of your life dominate who you are? How has this book encouraged you to diversify the ways you define yourself?

AN INTERVIEW

with Besha Rodell

BESHA RODELL is a James Beard Award–winning food writer, editor, and restaurant critic who has been obsessed with eating out since she was a child. Born in Australia in a bungalow on a farm her father dubbed Narnia, she moved to the United States as a teenager. She has been writing professionally for more than two decades, and her work has appeared in numerous publications, including *The New York Times*, *Food & Wine*, *Saveur*, *Bon Appétit*, *Travel + Leisure*, PUNCH, *Eater*, *Gravy*, and many others. She was the restaurant critic at *LA Weekly* and was a critic and columnist for *The New York Times*, where she is still a regular contributor. In 2019 Besha was tapped by *Food & Wine* to be their global critic, traveling the world solo to pick the best restaurants for an annual list. She is currently the chief restaurant critic at *The Age*, the daily newspaper in Melbourne, Australia. Besha moved back to Australia in 2017, and lives in Melbourne with her husband, Ryan; her parrot, Chobi; and a rotating menagerie of foster cats.

How did you become a restaurant critic? Was it always your intention to remain anonymous?

The answer to this is so long and convoluted that I had to write a book about it! There are a number of quick answers: I got knocked up and dropped out of college, and that's what happens when you do that, apparently: You become a restaurant critic. I worked in restaurants for so long that when I decided to pursue journalism, I only knew about restaurants. So that's what I wrote about. Right place, right time. At the time I became a critic, anonymity was part of the job. I got in at the last second — I never had my photo on the internet, because I started this life right at the moment social media became unavoidable. Since then, I've seen it as a tool that is incredibly useful. I never imagined I'd keep it up this long, but somehow I have.

You started your career at a very interesting time, right before blogs were democratizing how the public consumed food media. What have been the biggest changes you've seen during your career?

The death of the alt-weekly and the small local newspaper in general. And because of that, fewer trusted local writers who try to behave according to a set of journalistic principles, etc. I don't think that's thanks to blogs or Yelp or whatever, it's mainly due to...late-stage capitalism? I was so lucky to see the early days of blogs, to see the potential of that democratization. But the internet sucks now.

What is your most memorable dining experience?

I barely remember what I ate last week, honestly. When we're talking about experience, often the most memorable restaurants are ones that are remarkable for reasons that might include the food, but the memory is about something other than the food — eating at MIL, for instance, in Peru's sacred valley, near Machu Picchu, with that amazing light coming in the windows. But when it comes to food memories, I often remember things that are more modest but just achingly pleasurable. An egg, tomato, and cheese biscuit from Sunrise Biscuit Kitchen in North Carolina; a turkey hero from the deli in Tarrytown, where I went to high school. Sitting on a bench in the fall looking out at the Hudson River eating that sandwich — perfect meal.

Why did you decide to write this memoir now?

I feel as though at this point, my life and career have a very distinct arc, and it's one that follows what has happened over the last 20 years in media and in food — so it's a good time to look back at what's happened, to me, but also to all of us who care about food and culture.



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If you decide to adopt *Hunger Like a Thirst* for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please let us know by emailing us at reader@celadonbooks.com or post on social media using the hashtags #CeladonBookClub and #HungerLikeAThirst.