



TENDER AT THE BONE
by Ruth Reichl

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About Ruth Reichl

Ruth Reichl is the chief editor at *Gourmet Magazine*, and was the chief restaurant critic for the *New York Times*. She held the same post at the *Los Angeles Times* for ten years and was chef/owner at the Swallow Restaurant in California in the mid-seventies. She has written for numerous publications, including *Vanity Fair*, *Family Circle*, *Metropolitan Home* and *Food and Wine*.

An interview between Ruth Reichl & Jeffrey L. Perlah

Early on, you discovered that ‘food could be a way of making sense of the world’.

It’s a way of giving yourself something of quality. Just to make yourself a perfect egg in the morning is a way of saying, ‘I respect myself’.

The book points out that sweets are a big part of the beginner’s repertoire.

You learn very early that dessert is sort of a cheap trick. As a beginning cook, you make cookies and brownies, and other sweets, and people love them even if they’re not great.

What’s challenging about being a restaurant critic in New York City?

When Craig Claiborne [formerly of the *New York Times*] was doing restaurant criticism, he had to know about French food, continental food, maybe a little bit about Italian food, and that was pretty much it. Today, you have to know about food from all over the world, and, if you don’t, you have to learn about it. No credible critic today can talk about Japanese food without really having some knowledge of it. It’s more so in New York than in many other places.

Your college friend Mac first made you aware of the way food was bringing people together, and keeping them apart.

A lot of foods eaten by Europeans are considered disgusting by Americans. If you go to any restaurant in France, you’re likely to find kidneys, livers, and brains. And eating a lot of garlic was something that ostracized Jews and Italians from polite society in New York. If you showed up with garlic on your breath, it often classified you as lower class. But one of the great things that

has happened today is we eat foods from many different cultures. Food doesn't keep us apart now.

Was your mother's lack of good cooking skills a factor in your approach to food?

It was not so much her cooking skills as the fact that she was taste blind. She would leave butter uncovered in the refrigerator, put it on the table, and later in the day I would say, 'I can't eat it.' And she would taste it and say, 'there's nothing wrong with it.' I would taste things that she couldn't.

On the other hand, your father was a book designer. Was that an influence on your writing?

I think so. I was brought up in a world of books. My parents never had a television. Books were really their whole life. And certainly words were. I think I grew up really feeling the importance of telling stories, making a reality out of these little black marks on a paper. I was an only child, and my way of making a world for myself was through reading.

The above interview has been reprinted with permission from *Bookselling This Week* at <http://news.bookweb.org/home/services/56.html>. Read another interview with Ruth Reichl at *The Salon*: www.salonmagazine.com/nov96/interview2961118.html

Reviews

***Australian Good Taste*—Lesley O'Brien**

To Ruth Reichl—restaurant critic with the *New York Times*—food is a sensual experience: the taste, texture and the aroma always unlocks a memory. This book is a bagful of those memories, scattered throughout with recipes (be warned: imperial weights and measures). Ruth takes us from the horrors dished up by her mother to weird but satisfying days at a collectively owned restaurant in the '70s. Ruth's story moves easily between the food on the table and the memorable moments in her life.

***The Canberra Times*—Bron Sibree**

Talking to Ruth Reichl is like taking a voyage around hope. It's also like taking a journey to some charmed neighbourhood in some charmed time past. And as she walks you down the

streets of her memory this 48-year-old New Yorker holds you captive, because, as she says in her bestselling memoir *Tender at the Bone*, ‘I learned early that the most important thing in life is a good story’.

But the woman described as the most powerful voice on food in America holds you captive for the same reason her memoir won people in the millions in America, and stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for months. Because, in an era when food is increasingly about celebrity, when chefs and food writers rise to the top of their profession according to the number of cooking schools they’ve attended, or television shows they appear on, Reichl is talking about an altogether different set of credentials.

. . . Her story of a childhood shaped by a manic-depressive mother who ‘was taste-blind and unafraid of rot’ is strewn with the stories of a myriad characters who fostered her inordinate passion for food along the way. It is seamed too, with wry humour, sadness and recipes in equal parts, as she charts the perils of having an unparalleled passion for food, while being descended from generations of non-cooks.

So candidly and expertly has she laid bare the tender corners of her life that she can no longer sit in an aeroplane or walk into a room full of strangers without someone coming up and pouring out their most intimate details. They feel they know her. They know all the people in her life. And they know, too, that for Reichl, food is an invisible power that has encircled her life since she was six years old, like a magical bracelet of destiny.

But when she first unveiled her collection of stories about a motley crew of characters that was to become the manuscript of *Tender at the Bone*, her then publisher said, ‘Who cares about your childhood? We’re interested in your life as a famous restaurant critic, not in these stories!’ To which Reichl, already restaurant critic of the *New York Times*, replied, ‘Food is more than just something to eat.’

‘Food is very much about connecting to people,’ says Reichl. ‘All the people who are in the book had given me so much. It was due to them that I had the best job in the world and I wanted to tell their stories. It was time to give them life.’

. . . But if her life was determined by food, it was only when she gave form to her cherished people on the page, that the map of her own life became clear. ‘Because in my family food wasn’t something anybody took seriously, I never had any sense as to how food just saved my life over and over again, and how all these people who had been my guardian angels had done it through food. That for me was one of the great realisations of writing the book.’

In giving voice to this colourful tableau of characters from New York to California and beyond, Reichl manages to trace the story of the food revolution that has occurred in America in the past 30 years. Whether it's her Greenwich Village childhood of the '50s seen via her eccentric family; or a nostalgic portrait of Lower East Side New York conveyed through her weekly encounters with Mr Izzy T, the ancient Jewish quiltmaker; from Little Italy, where she shared recipes and stories with Mr Bergamini the butcher, to the ferment of Berkeley in the '70s where she lived in a communal house and worked in a cooperative restaurant, Reichl is in her element.

The Age—Michael Shmith

Ruth Reichl is the former restaurant critic for the *New York Times*, and a fine writer with a marvellous sense of nostalgia that communicates itself instantly. Her reminiscences are episodic, and all the more enchanting for it. She presents her family for what they were: her mother's unwitting attempts to poison most of her dinner guests; her father's mysterious past, including flying, as a child with Wilbur Wright; and her own introduction to, and experiences of, food. Recipes occur, but always with a history. The result is tender, wise, funny and—as with the best food writers—leaves you wanting more.

The New York Times on the Web—Paul Levy

The memoirs of food writers have particular poignancy, for the child really is father to the man. The tale of the growth and development of appetite, while always personal and specific, is universally interesting—as is proved by the work of writers as various as Jeffrey Steingarten, A.J. Leibling, Barbara Kafka and M.F.K. Fisher. But while all good food writers are humorous—it's a feature of the genre—few are so riotously, effortlessly entertaining as Ruth Reichl.

... Reichl's fans will not be surprised to learn that I laughed a lot while reading her sometimes achingly funny book. But I was also moved, and drew a sharp breath of sympathy from time to time at the candor of some of the tougher passages. She is honest about a wide range of subjects, from her fear of driving and panic attacks on bridges to more serious worries about her mother's failure to take her lithium and her venomous warnings that manic depression can be inherited.

All autobiographers have a problem conjuring with the truth. My own strategy is to regard writing about oneself as inadvertent fiction. Reichl's is contained in her first sentence ('Storytelling, in my family, was highly prized') and in the conclusion to which it leads her: 'Everything here is true, but it may not be entirely factual.' She admits to compressing events, combining characters and indulging in a bit of embroidery. Never mind. I believe all her stories—and if your mouth has ever watered when you smelled something good or you've ever been overwhelmed with curiosity about how something will taste, you will too.

Before Reichl learned to write about food, of course, she learned to eat. And in writing about her childhood, she confirms my feeling that the best background for becoming a good cook is to be descended through the female line from generations of noncooks, and to be brought up (as was still possible in the early 1950's) by professionals—by maids who did the cooking.

. . . Memoir writing gives us a chance to play God and re-create our own families, especially our parents, and Reichl has triumphed in her portrait of her unstable mother, Miriam, a Ph.D. unfazed by moldy food, 'taste-blind and unafraid of rot'. Her economies (scrape off the decay, throw nothing away, cater large parties with leftovers from the automat) taught her daughter many things: "The first was that food could be dangerous, especially to those who loved it . . . My parents entertained a great deal, and before I was 10 I had appointed myself guardian of the guests. My mission was to keep Mom from killing anybody who came to dinner."

Jane Grigson used to say that no good food writer ever set out to be one, but invariably fell into the profession by accident. Reichl's career path was straighter than most. Despite degrees in sociology and art history, she worked in restaurants as a waitress and then a cook. Waiting on tables, she learned that the cooks regard running a restaurant as warfare, but when she became a cook herself in the 1970's it was in a pacific, though class-conscious, Berkeley collective. Married to an artist, living in a commune and cooking Thanksgiving dinner for 12 with food rescued from Dumpsters, she was at last able to sympathize with her mother's view of the undesirability of waste.

As her readers will have guessed (but she didn't at the time), all this was an apprenticeship for the one job at which she was bound to excel—restaurant reviewing. She knew how restaurants worked. Childhood vacations in France and a stint at a French boarding school in Canada, plus travels in North Africa, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy, had also endowed her with a terrific taste memory. And she knew she could write—after all, she started her life in Berkeley by 'writing term papers for a living'.

After that, it was just a question of meeting a few people: the generous Marion Cunningham, Cecilia Chiang and Kermit Lynch, the odious James Beard. (She tells it like it is.) Yet part of the charm of Reichl's memoir is her refusal to name-drop on the usual scale. Instead, she concentrates on the characters of the people she loves. Chief among these is her mild-mannered, long-suffering, scholarly German Jewish father. Eventually, she comes to realize that he has been a willing accomplice to his more flamboyant spouse, enjoying 'the tumult Mom created'. And Reichl discovers that her father kept some secrets of his own: he had flown with Wilbur Wright and—very satisfying for a daughter who was a veteran protester against the Vietnam War—been a draft dodger in Germany.

Some suggested points for discussion

- ◆ Reichl says of her memoir: ‘Everything here is true, but it may not be entirely factual.’ How is this possible? Are there problems with writing about real life as though it was fiction? Do you think Reichl’s elaborations merely make *Tender at the Bone* the absorbing read it is?
- ◆ Reichl has the description of food and dining down to a fine art. What are your favourite passages where Reichl has sensuously and evocatively described food? She also has a talent for describing culinary nightmares. What are the most memorable?
- ◆ Which characters in Reichl’s memoir stand out the most? How does the food made and eaten by particular characters reflect their personality?
- ◆ Recipes are an integral part of Reichl’s memoir. What effect do they have? Did they enrich the story?
- ◆ ‘Storytelling in my family was highly prized?’ Do you think Reichl is a good storyteller? What qualities in her writing suggest this?

Further reading

Comfort Me With Apples by Ruth Reichl

Endless Feasts edited by Ruth Reichl

Kitchen Confidential by Anthony Bourdain

Hunger by Terry Durack

Kitchen Congregation a Memoir by Nora Seton