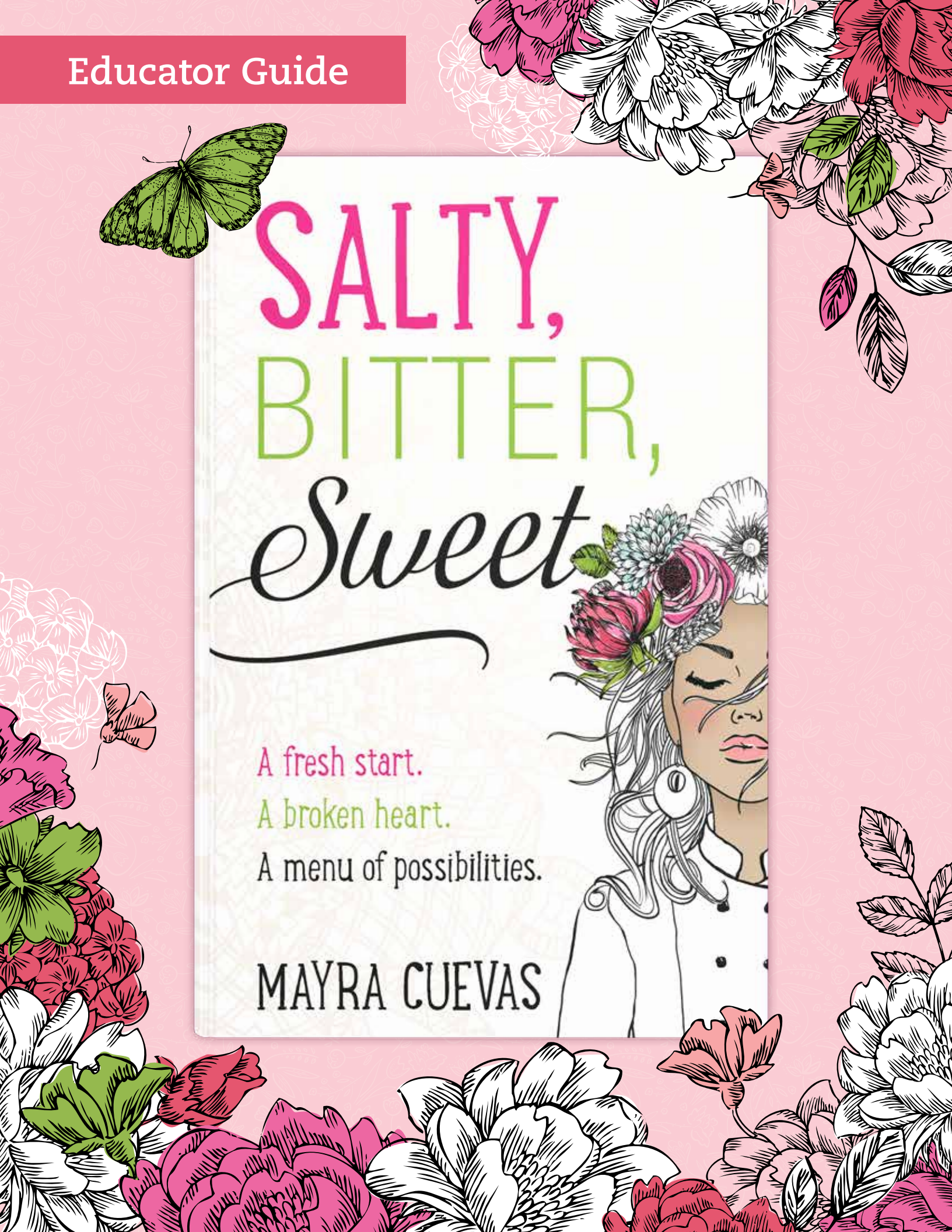




SALTY, BITTER, *Sweet*

A fresh start.
A broken heart.
A menu of possibilities.

MAYRA CUEVAS



Salty, Bitter, Sweet Educator Guide



Summary (Blink):

Aspiring chef, Isabella Fields' family has fallen apart since the death of her abuela and the divorce of her parents. She moves in with her dad and her new stepmom. Margo, in Lyon, France, where Isa feels like an outsider in her dad's new life. She balances her time between avoiding the awkward "why did you cheat on Mom?" conversation with figuring out how a perpetually single woman can at least be a perpetually single chef.

The upside of Isa's world being turned upside down? She is now located only thirty minutes from the restaurant of world-famous Chef Grattard, who runs a prestigious, competitive international kitchen apprenticeship. The prize job at Chef Grattard's renowned restaurant represents a transformative opportunity for Isa, who is desperate to get her life back in order—and desperate to prove she has what it takes to work in a haute kitchen. But Isa's stress and repressed grief begin to unravel when the attractive and enigmatic Diego shows up unannounced.

How can Isa expect to hold it together when she's at the bottom of her apprenticeship class, her new stepmom is pregnant, she misses her abuela dearly, and things with Diego reach a boiling point?

About the Author:

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Mayra Cuevas is a professional journalist and fiction writer who adores love stories with happy endings. Her debut fiction short story was selected by Becky Albertalli as a New Voice in the Foreshadow YA serial anthology in 2019. She is a TV and digital producer for CNN, where she has worked since 2003. She keeps her sanity by practicing Buddhist meditation and serves on the Board of Directors of Kadampa Meditation Center Georgia. She lives in the colorful town of Norcross, Georgia with her husband, also a CNN journalist, and their cat, Felicia. She is the wicked step-mom to two amazing young men who provide plenty of inspiration for her stories. Follow her on Twitter @MayraECuevas and Instagram @MayraCuevas. In addition to discussing her book, Mayra is available to speak on:

- Having a dual career as an author and in journalism
- Latina culture
- Finding success in a male dominated industry
- How food binds people together





Historical and Geographical Background:

While the novel mainly takes place in Lyon, France, with some episodes happening in Catalonia, Spain, and the United States, Isabella Fields' grandmother shares her stories of her life in Cuba. Isabella's grandmother is a part of a group of people who moved away from their original homeland. This dispersion is called "diaspora." Here is a brief history of the Cuban diaspora in the United States:

The Cuban immigration to the United States started in 1959 when Fidel Castro, a member of the Communist Party, became the president of Cuba. The majority of immigrants were middle- and upper-class citizens who were well-educated and were usually fluent in English. Cuba was the first Communist country in Latin America. Although Castro made some social advancements with his policies (support for the arts, access to public education and affordable healthcare), the political situation threatened the Cuban people with other policies that are harmful (death penalty, redistribution of wealth and different forms of torture for people who disagreed with the Communist party). As refugees of the Communist system, immigrants had the support of the American government and other nonprofit organizations. The United States Congress helped Cuban immigrants leave their homeland under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA) that allowed Cubans to become lawful permanent residents (green card holders) after being physically in the states for one year.

Lyon, France:

Lyon is one of the biggest cities in France after Paris and Marseille. While Isabella's French family comes from Villefrance-sur-Mer in the southeastern side of France, most of the novel takes place in Lyon because it is the gastronomical capital of the world. Lyon's culture consists of specific *bouchons* (small restaurants that serve different meats, the famous *salade Lyonnaise*, and traditional Lyonnais cheeses) and its unique cuisine. As you prepare to follow Isabella's adventures in Lyon, think about why the author chose Lyon as the location of Isabella's kitchen apprenticeship.

Similar to Lala's Cuba, Lyon endured the troubling occupation of National Socialism during World War II that forced many families to move away to different European countries such as Spain. There were members of the French *Résistance*, such as Lucie Aubrac, who fought against the injustices brought upon France by Germany during the 1940s. Aubrac shares her harrowing account of life in German-occupied France in her memoir, *Ils partiront dans l'ivresse* (*Outwitting the Gestapo*). This historical background provides a good comparative exercise between the histories of Cuba and France. Find more information on Lucie Aubrac here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/18/world/europe/18aubrac.html>



Barcelona, Catalonia:

Isabella goes on a weekend trip to Barcelona where she meets a series of diverse characters who had been involved in the culinary world. Catalonia is an autonomous community located in the northeastern corner of Spain. The character of Diego is from Barcelona and fluent in Spanish, French, Catalanian and English. His proficiency in multiple language speaks to the linguistic diversity in Europe. In terms of culture, Catalonia is a distinguished part of Spain that is very different from Castile (where Madrid is located) and the rest of the country. Although Catalonia's eccentric and vibrant gastronomy differs from Lyon's haute cuisine, Isabella uncovers inspiration in some of Catalonia's traditional dishes and beverages such as *pop a la catalana*, *croquetas*, *sangria* and *orxata*.

Language Vocabulary:

The novel features a number of foreign languages, especially Spanish (sp) and French (fr) words and phrases that are usually translated or explained in context. The novel realistically portrays the multiculturalism and multilingualism of many immigrants and children of immigrants in the United States. It may be helpful to identify and discuss relevant vocabulary and use digital tools such as Google Translate or WordReference to listen to the native pronunciation of the words. While this is not a comprehensive list, it should offer further insight on the linguistic breadth of the novel:

1. *mija* (abb. *mi hija*, sp): this word is used as a term of endearment between an older family member and a younger female family member.
2. *fille américaine* (fr): a young American woman.
3. *souris* (fr): mouse
4. Lala (sp): Isabella's grandmother. Her name most likely comes from the Spanish word *abuela*, meaning "grandmother."
5. *La Table de Lyon* (fr): The table of Lyon.
6. *Je suis désolé(e)* (fr): "I am sorry."
7. *Graciès, gracias, merci*: "Thank you" in Catalan, Spanish and French, respectively.
8. *Faites attention* (fr): "Pay attention."
9. *Bon* (fr): "good."
10. *Papi* (sp): "daddy."
11. *No hay porque llorar* (sp): "There's no reason to cry."
12. *Oui* (fr): "Yes."



13. *Allez* (fr): “Let’s go!”
14. *Venga* (sp): “Come!”
15. *Virgencita* (sp): diminutive of *virgen*, in reference to the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. Following Catholic tradition, many Hispanics have a strong devotion for the Virgin Mary. Grandmothers and mothers ask the Virgin Mary to take care of their children and grandchildren. Lala does this throughout the novel.
16. *Comprenez-vous?* (fr): “Do you understand me?” Chef Troissant asks Isabella.
17. *Bienvenue* (fr): “Welcome.”
18. *Alors* (fr): “So ...”
19. *Santé* (*À votre santé*, fr): a saying before drinking a beverage. “Cheers,” in English.
20. *Mi niña bonita* (sp): “my beautiful girl.”
21. *Hablamos después* (sp): “We’ll talk later.”
22. *¿Me entiendes?* (sp): “Do you understand me?”
23. *Je ne sais pas* (fr): “I don’t know.”
24. *De nada* (sp): “You’re welcome.”
25. *Buen provecho* (sp): “Enjoy your meal!” (*Bon appétit*, fr)



Before Reading:

Students will complete mini-research and discussions prior to reading *Salty, Bitter, Sweet*. Teachers will help facilitate discussions and record questions on an online bulletin board such as Google Classroom.

1. Isa, the main character, speaks three different languages and is caught in the middle of three cultures: French, Cuban and Midwestern. She appears to come from divergent worlds. Research where Lyon, France, Cuba, and the Midwest are geographically located. Discuss with your classmates your general knowledge of French, Cuban, and Midwestern culture. How do you think the convergence of all of these cultures affect the main character?
[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.6]
2. Isabella's grandmother, Lala, shares stories of her former life in Cuba. Research the history of Cuba's Cuban Revolution and the country's former president, Fidel Castro. What happened when he came into power? Why do you think Lala had to move to the United States after Castro came into power?
[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.4, 9-10.4, 11-12.4]
3. In any work of literature, readers encounter new vocabulary. Thankfully, the book provides us with a list of new words that may be unfamiliar to a non-cooking reader. Read Isabella's Kitchen Notes at the end of the book. There are many foreign culinary dishes described in this novel. Which of these are new to students? In addition to these words, there are a series of words in six different languages (Spanish, French, Catalan, Polish, and Italian). Write down unfamiliar words or phrases in your notebook to later be discussed amongst your classmates.
[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.1;9-10.4;11-12.4]
4. Read the author's biography. Cuevas comes from Puerto Rico, an island in the Caribbean that is very close to Cuba. Discuss what makes this author qualified to tell this story. Write a few sentences in your interactive notebook to discuss during your reading of the novel. Use evidence from the Acknowledgements section and the Author's Note at the end of the book to support your answer.
[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.4, 9-10.4, 11-12.4]



During Reading:

Students will keep an interactive notebook to record thoughts, feelings, questions, and concerns while reading *Salty, Bitter, Sweet*. Teachers will facilitate discussions with students conferring with other readers.

Chapters 1-5:

1. Write entries for every character that is introduced in the novel, such as Lala, Papi, Margo, Diego, and Isa's classmates at her prestigious program. How do you think their stories will unfold throughout the novel?
2. The story interlaces memories of Isa's grandmother, the harsh memories of her parents' divorce and her present story at her culinary school. Note how the author manipulates time in order to build elements of surprise and suspense.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.3, 9-10.3, 11-12.3]

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.5, 9-10.5, 11-12.5]

Chapters 6-11:

1. Isabella mentions that Julia Child once said, "Tears mess up your makeup" (Chapter 6). Research who Julia Child was and why her work as a female chef changed the landscape of high-class cuisine. Write down a few sentences about Julia Child in your journal.
2. The girls in the class, Pippa, Lucia, and Isabella, talk about the double standards between men and women in the workplace. Why do you think this is an important conversation that they're having? Use evidence from the novel to support your answer.
3. You learn more about the different characters in the story in these chapters. How would you describe each character at this point of the novel? Write down a reflection on how the characters have affected the events of the story so far.
4. There are a lot of Spanish sayings, such as "Frente al amor y la muerte, no sirve nada ser fuerte" ("It's useless to fight against love or death"). Write down the different sayings in Spanish in your notebook and try to think of equivalent phrases, idioms, or sayings in English.
5. In Chapter 9, you find out the cause of Lala's death. Why do you think it was important to her to help Bubba, Milly, Mary, and others like them?

[CSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.7, 9-10.7]

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.1, 9-10.1, 11-12.1]

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3] [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5]

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.1, 9-10.1, 11-12.1]

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3] [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5]



6. Chapter 10 features Isabella’s French mother and grandmother, Mamie. Her Mamie complains about Isa’s dark complexion. Colorism is an issue faced within many Hispanic cultures and other cultures with people of color. Why do you think it’s an important issue to discuss today? Summarize these issues in your notebook paying attention to Isabella’s point of view.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.2,9-10.2] [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.6]

7. Isabella has an unconventional family and does not get along with her new stepmother, Margo. Diego seems to have a complicated relationship with his father too. How are both of their situations similar? How does the author present both of these situations within the context of the novel?

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.5,9-10.5,11-12.5]

Chapters 12-16:

1. Isabella runs into her culinary hero, Chef Legrand, who is a recipient of the MOF (*Un des Meilleurs Ouvriers de la France* translated as One of the Best Workers in France). The MOF is one of the most unique and prestigious awards that celebrates different French artisans and professionals. Isabella seeks the advice of the MOF recipient, chef Legrand, in chapter 13 and he tells her that she must do whatever it takes to be the best. Write down in your notebook the examples he gives her. What did you think of his advice?

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.5,9-10.5,11-12.5]

2. Chef Legrand says, “That girl wants to win. Americans are nice until you get in their way. Then, they bring out the big guns” (Chapter 13). In what way is this foreshadowing for what happens in Chapter 16? Connect this American stereotype to the incident in Chapter 16 and write down the structural components of the novel in your notebook.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.5,9-10.5,11-12.5]

3. Chapters 14-16 also identify Isabella’s growing interest in Diego. How does she struggle with her crush on Diego? How does the novel hint at this crush? How does Isabella’s point of view help us understand her crush?

Chapters 17-21:

1. How does Isabella’s betrayal relate to the death of one of her favorite chefs?
2. One of the recurring themes of the novel is the concept of success. Isabella struggles with her classes and constantly thinks about her grandmother’s stories. How does the author manage to tie these two episodes together thematically?
3. After the big incident with Lucia happens, Pippa confronts Isabella and tells her “Strong



women lift each other up” (Chapter 20). The author, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* presents us with the idea of female friendship, sisterhood and comradery. How can you connect these ideas to the story and to other examples in pop culture?

[CGSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.9,9-10.9,11-12.9]

4. Answer the following questions in your notebook. How does Isa reconcile her friendship with Diego? What lessons do you think Isa has learned with everything that has transpired in her life recently?

Chapters 22-25:

1. One of the main themes of the novel is grief. Isabella is dealing with multiple types of grief: the death of her grandmother, Lala, and the recent divorce of her parents. How does the author juxtapose both memories of these tragic events in Isabella’s life?
2. Chapter 22 features further insight on Lala’s life in Cuba. She mentions that she had a nursing degree and never expected to have left her homeland. Isabella’s family history seems to consist on issues of loss and repurposing of life plans. Lala says, “But life is like that, mija. You make all of these plans, you have all of these dreams, and things don’t always work out the way you planned” (Chapter 22). Write a couple of lines explaining the significance of Lala’s words in the structure of the novel.

[CGSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.5,9-10.5,11.5]

3. Lucia tells Isabella, “Look around you; we are the only two girls in this kitchen. Instead of wasting our energy backstabbing each other, like they do, why don’t we focus on helping each other” (Chapter 23). Why is it important that Lucia and Isabella come to this conclusion?

[CGSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.2,9-10.2,11-12.2]

4. Diego is a Catalonian native and he takes Isabella on a trip to Barcelona. Write down any unfamiliar words and research what they mean. What is the purpose of this trip within the context of the story? What are some of the lessons that Isabella learns here?

[CGSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.4,9-10.4,11-12.4]

Chapters 26-30:

1. Isabella and Diego bond over their respective relationships with their fathers. Diego claims, “My father just sees me as a trophy son” (Chapter 26). What can you say about Isabella’s character development in the story?

[CGSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.3,9-10.3,11-12.3]

2. Isabella reads the story of a man in his eighties whose family had fled Nazi-occupied France in the 1940s and carried their recipes to Barcelona. The story resonates with Isabella because



the family recipes of this man are his “legado/legacy” (Chapter 27). Why do you think this was significant to Isabella? What is her family’s *legado*?

[CGSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.4,9-10.4,11-12.4]

3. Isabella shares her grandmother’s life story with Diego. In that moment, she openly speaks about her feelings about Lala’s death. Why does Diego tell Isa, “You’re just like her” (Chapter 29)? How does the author talk about one of the main themes of the novel, grief?

[CGSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.2,9-10.2,11-12.2]

Post-Reading Questions and Activities

1. Interview: Isabella Fields listens to many of her grandmother’s oral histories. Sharing memories with grandparents or other elderly people allows us to connect to a different generation and learn about a different time in history. Conduct an interview with an elderly relative, neighbor, or family friend. Explore and listen to different oral histories using StoryCorps, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Oral History Archive or other local oral history websites. Write a report based on the research you conducted and evidence from the book.

[CGSS.ELA.Literacy.W.8.2, 9-10.2,11-12.2]

2. Research: Isabella Fields has a diverse family history (French, Cuban, and Midwestern). Throughout the novel, we learn about these three different cultures. Research and interview your family members to find out what customs and traditions are passed down generationally and determine their origins.

[CGSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.1;9-10.1, 11-12.1]

3. Letter Writing and Research: Reread the newspaper article featured in Chapter 18 about Chef Bernard Martin’s suicide. Then, research the famous chef Anthony Bourdain and his tragic death in 2019. Anthony Bourdain was a world-famous chef and the host of the food travel series, Top Chef and No Reservations. Bourdain struggled with depression and anxiety that became intensified due to his high-stress career. In the novel, Isabella expresses that she’s suddenly questioning everything she thought she knew about her field after she finds out about Chef Bernard Martin’s death. How do these articles connect to one another? What message is the book trying to evoke about the pressures of being the best chef in the world? Write a letter to Isabella connecting these two articles where you can provide some advice on how to lessen the stress and burden of her career path.

[CGSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.1;9-10.1, 11-12.1] [CGSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.7;9-10.7, 11-12.7]

- a. A Note for Educators: When discussing suicide with young adults, the most important thing to emphasize is to not plant suicidal thoughts in someone’s brain by discussing



suicide. The point of this exercise is to normalize depression and anxiety in order to reduce the stigma of mental health conditions while having the students acknowledge the pressures of Isabella's career path. Psychologists would also recommend being careful with the language you choose to use with students. For instance, say "died by suicide" instead of "committed suicide" and say "died" instead of "passed away."

- b. Teachers can provide the following resources to students who may be in emotional distress or suicidal crisis:
 - i. Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK
 - ii. Text TALK to 741741 for 24/7 anonymous, free counseling
 - iii. Call Trevor Lifeline, 1-866-488-7386, a free and confidential lifeline for LGBT youth

Themes Activity:

The thematic elements of the novel contain an abundance of information on personal issues. As students read, maintain a good discussion by asking students to answer open-ended questions with textual evidence. In this case, the discussion can revolve around the novel's themes:

1. **Success:** The novel features the young chef Isabella Fields who is trying her best to make it into the culinary industry. Her failures and successes make up a big portion of the novel. The novel constantly questions what the true meaning of success is.
2. **Courage and Determination:** The book features a character who is defined by her courage and determination to be the best chef. However, the definition of success changes and realigns itself with the characterization of Isabella.
3. **Grief and Loss:** *Salty, Bitter, Sweet* portrays the loss of Isabella's grandmother and the divorce of her parents. Although these two events appear to be unrelated, Isabella feels an intense amount of grief as she tries to cope with grandmother's death and the dissolution of her family.
4. **Unconventional Families:** Due to unforeseen circumstances, Isabella now finds herself in an unconventional family in a number of ways: her father and mother are separated, her father is expecting a child with another woman, her grandmother passed away, her new stepmother has a stepson, etc. These complicated issues help shape the narrative structure of the novel.
5. **Memory and Tradition:** The novel features an interesting narrative structure that intertwines the past and the present by using *analepsis* (flashbacks). The construction of the novel depends on the portrayal of Isabella's memories. At the same time, tradition is portrayed through oral histories and the transmission of customs and beliefs that are passed from generation to generation (i.e., Lala to Isabella).



Recommended Discussion Questions:

1. What is the main character's definition of success? How do you define success within your own life?
2. How does Isabella's courage and determination change throughout the novel? What are some examples of times when her courage and determination have wavered?
3. Unconventional families often include a grandparent or another family member as an important caretaker of children. How does the loss of Lala redefine Isabella's career ambitions?
4. The author's note at the end of the book states, "Isabella's story was born from my own teen years and the role that my abuelos played during my parents' rocky marriage and consequent divorce." What role do unconventional families have in the novel? What other examples of unconventional families can you think of?
5. Leo Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina*, a novel about complicated families in Imperial Russia. The first line of his novel says, "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its way." How do you think this quote relates to the rest of the novel? Provide specific evidence from *Salty, Bitter, Sweet*.
6. How does the novel portray Isabella's memories of Lala? What is their narrative importance?

Patricia Ruiz-Rivera, author of the educator guide, has a doctoral degree in Comparative Literature with a focus on Latin American and French culture, fiction, and history. Patricia is an avid reader who speaks five languages, loves golden retriever puppies, and drinks copious amounts of coffee.