

# Study Guide:

## Jehanne Dubrow's *Taste: A Book of Small Bites*

### General Questions for Writing, Discussion, and Review

1. *Taste* opens with a humorous expression that the author's family uses: "Taste this and tell me if I like it." What kinds of taste-related traditions does your family have?
2. *Taste* takes an interdisciplinary approach, exploring works of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, as well as films, operas, works of visual art, philosophical texts. What is the effect of connecting a wide variety of disciplines? What does this tell readers about the challenge of thinking about (and writing about!) taste.
3. In the book's introduction, Dubrow asserts that "We are what we eat, because the things we consume become part of our cells, the movement of our thoughts, even what we perceive as the beautiful." If you are what you eat, then who are you? Are you fast food? Are you organic? Are you leftovers? What would your tastes tell others about your identity, your origins, your passions?
4. At the end of *Taste*, Dubrow explores how taste lends itself to metaphorical language: "Taste is so much a part of our metaphor-making that it is difficult to imagine the figurative without it. An end may be called bitter. Happiness can be described as sweet. Desire is characterized as a thirst or hunger." Are there taste metaphors you use in your own life? Why do they have power? How do they help you to communicate your thoughts and feelings?
5. Throughout *Taste*, Dubrow discusses how we judge others for their tastes (not only in foods but in other pursuits as well). Think of a time you judged someone for their taste. What incited your judgement? Did your judgement affect how you saw that person in a significant, permanent way?

## Questions About the Sweet

1. *Taste* opens with the sweet, looking at the fruit of knowledge of good and evil. Do you think knowledge is a fruit—an apple? a pomegranate? a pear? If you could reimagine the story of Adam and Eve would you say that knowledge is sweet? Or would you give it an entirely new taste?
2. Taking a cue from Marcel Proust's madeleine, do you have a particular food whose taste immediately throws you back into the past? What is that food? Where and when does it take you? What does it make you feel?
3. In several essays, including "Such Hints of Honey," Dubrow writes about how sweetness may sit in close proximity to trauma. Is there a taste—from your own life—that is sweet while also evoking sadness or grief?

## Questions About the Sour

1. "A Few Glittering Seeds" considers different versions of the story of Persephone and the pomegranate seeds she ate in the underworld. Dubrow writes, "So many of the details rest on who recounts it." Taste is often a matter of perspective. What particular tastes have you found to be divisive? Is there a taste you love that the people around you hate?
2. In "An Acid Light," Dubrow attempts to celebrate disillusioned, unhappy people. "But if we were to view these people in the way that van Gogh once approached the canvas, then we might see the sourest among us as shining objects, full of light and color. We might see them too as a luxury good. Their caustic speech polishes even the dullest conversations." Is there an argument to be made in favor of sour people? How do you defend or appreciate those with sour dispositions?

## Questions About the Salty

1. The salty section of *Taste* explores several items that are not foods, namely tears and sweat. In "Tearless Centuries," Dubrow looks at the different functions that weeping may serve in our lives. In "First the Nose, Then the Tongue," she writes about the importance of sweat as a sign of the body's

vitality. What other non-food items have powerful, evocative tastes? What emotions do these things evoke?

### **Questions About the Bitter**

1. The bitter section of *Taste* contains a number of beverages: tea, coffee, hot chocolate. Each one seems to lead us toward self-reflection, rumination, or contemplation. Why is that? What is it about these drinks that causes the mind to turn inward?
2. In “The Bond of Living Things,” Dubrow discusses a poem by Lucille Clifton, in which the poet draws a connection between a very specific food and ancestral memory. In your own family, is there a food whose flavor makes you feel linked to the generations that came before you? What emotion does that connection produce in you?

### **Questions About Umami**

1. In “Clear to the Bottom of the Bowl,” Dubrow writes about broths—across cultures and geographies—that are made of simple ingredients but that, nonetheless, offer comfort and nourishment. What kinds of personal, familial, or cultural associations to you bring to these sorts of soups? Do they comfort you? Remind you of sickness? Evoke a particular time of the year?