

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Have you ever considered uprooting your life and moving to another country? If so, where would you go and why?
2. Early in the book, Isabelle defines the term “kitchen Chinese” as the pidgin Chinese that she speaks, and she struggles with her rudimentary language skills throughout the story. Why do you think the author chose this as the title? What role does language play in the book?
3. Why does Isabelle initially resist the idea of moving to China? Do you sympathize with her reluctance?
4. In what ways does the relationship between Isabelle and Claire evolve throughout the course of the story?
5. Isabelle is the younger of the two sisters. Do you think it is true that the younger has to live up to the perfection of the elder, or that the younger gets to do what the elder wishes she could do?
6. How does Isabelle’s discovery of Chinese cuisine affect her perceptions of China? In your opinion, what is the best way to learn about or understand a foreign place or culture?
7. Have you ever felt like a fish out of water, culturally, socially, or otherwise? How did you adapt?
8. Isabelle discovers that dating in Beijing is equally—if not more—challenging and confusing than dating in New York. In what ways do cultural differences and/or similarities affect her romantic life?

9. Claire and Isabelle both feel challenged by their mother to achieve professional and romantic success. How does each sister respond to her mother's pressure? Are their feelings of frustration justified? Or does their mother really just want the best for them?
10. As Isabelle learns, many Chinese believe that "all Americans have yellow hair and big noses." In your experience, is this a widespread stereotype? How do you think people in other countries form their opinions of Americans? How do you form your opinions of other countries?

FROM THE KITCHEN OF ANN MAH

SPICY "MAPO TOFU"

I feel a little guilty calling this mapo tofu, because it's so far removed from its classic Sichuan roots—the meat (when I use it) is ground chicken or turkey breast, not pork, and the chili paste is Sriracha, not dou ban jiang (the famous, salty fermented soy bean sauce). I eat this when I'm feeling blue—after all, chilies raise endorphin levels! It's good with a bowl of white rice, but I also like it ladled over a deep bowl of long noodles and hot broth.

SERVES TWO AS MAIN COURSE (WITH LEFTOVERS FOR LUNCH THE NEXT DAY)

- 1 lb. firm tofu, drained and cut into 1½ inch cubes
- ½ lb. ground chicken or turkey breast (optional)
- 2 teaspoons canola or olive oil
- 1½ inch piece of ginger root, peeled and finely minced
- 3 garlic cloves, peeled and finely minced