



Bitter Greens

Kate Forsyth

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READING GROUP GUIDE

About the book:

Charlotte-Rose de la Force has been banished from the court of Versailles by the Sun King, Louis XIV, after a series of scandalous love affairs. She is comforted by an old nun, Sœur Seraphina, who tells her the tale of a young girl who, a hundred years earlier, is sold by her parents for a handful of bitter greens...

After Margherita's father steals from the walled garden of the courtesan Selena Leonelli, he is threatened with having both hands cut off, unless he and his wife give away their little girl. Selena is the famous red-haired muse of the artist Tiziano, first painted by him in 1512 and still inspiring him at the time of his death. Selena is at the center of Renaissance life in Venice, a world of beauty and danger, seduction and betrayal, love and superstition.

Locked away in a tower, Margherita sings in the hope that someone will hear her. One day, a young man does.

This sumptuous novel holds the stories of three women, braided together to create a compelling tale of desire, black magic and the redemptive power of love. A finalist for three awards, ***Bitter Greens*** is an impressive feat of storytelling.

Discussion Questions

1. Kate Forsyth has said that one of the greatest problems in writing a retelling of such a well-known fairytale was that it would be difficult to build suspense or surprise the reader. Do you think she succeeded in overcoming these problems? Did she surprise you? In what way?
2. Why do you think the name of Charles Perrault has been remembered when the names of the females in the French fairytale tradition have all been forgotten?



3. Why do you think Jeanne-Marie de Beaumont, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Henriette Julie de Murat, Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier, or Charlotte-Rose de la Force are not better known?
4. Are you glad that you are a woman of the 21st century? What would be the worst thing about being born in the time of any of the female characters of *Bitter Greens*?
5. Why do you think Selena locked up those little girls in the tower? Do you think she really loved them?
6. Which strand of the story did you like best? The tale of Margherita and her escape from the tower? The tale of Selena the courtesan and Titian's muse? Or the story of Charlotte-Rose de la Force, and how she came to write her fairytale? Why?
7. Look up Titian's paintings on the Internet or in an art book or check out Kate's Pinterest page 'Titian & His Muse': <http://www.pinterest.com/kateforsyth/titian-s-paintings-of-his-muse>
8. Do you agree he painted the same woman's face over and over again? Do you believe his model was a real woman, or was she merely an ideal of feminine beauty?
9. Kate Forsyth wrote *Bitter Greens* as the creative component of her doctorate 'The Rescue of Rapunzel'. One of her motivations was to restore to the figure of Rapunzel some of the power that was lost through the appropriation of the tale by male fairytale tellers. For example, the Grimm Brothers took out any mention of Rapunzel's pregnancy and the birth of twin children alone in the wilderness. Did you find your assumptions about the Rapunzel fairytale have changed as a consequence of reading *Bitter Greens*?
10. Kate Forsyth says it took her more than five years to research the background to *Bitter Greens*. She hired a French translator to translate works of Charlotte-Rose de la Force which had never before been translated into English; she visited the chateau where Charlotte-Rose was born and the church where she was married; and she took her three children with her to Versailles, Venice, Gascony and Lake Garda. Do you think her obsessive research paid off?
11. Do you think *Bitter Greens* would make a good movie? What actress would you pick to play the three heroines?
12. Read Kate Forsyth's blog, where she has written various blogs about the Facts behind the Fiction. Were you surprised to realize that most of the dramatic events of Charlotte-Rose's life really happened?

Want to learn more about Kate Forsyth?
Visit her online at www.kateforsyth.com.au or
find her on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads!



Suggestions for your BITTER GREENS Book Club night

Menu suggestions from the simple to the spectacular:

A platter of French cheese and *foie gras* to start, with crusty French bread.

Simple Gascon Onion Soup

Serves 6

7 large brown onions (one for each person and one for the pot)
2 cloves garlic
1 tablespoon of Duck fat (replace with olive oil if necessary)
1 and a half litres of Beef stock
50 ml Cognac, Brandy or preferably Armagnac
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
6 rounds of rustic French bread
1 cup of grated cheese - gruyere, emmentaler or parmesan.

Method

Slice the onions thinly. Melt the fat in a heavy based stockpot. Slowly fry the sliced onions and garlic until medium brown, stirring frequently. This will take about 20 minutes but it is important to allow the onions time to render their sweet juices and to caramelize some of the sugar.

When the onions and garlic are nicely brown add the beef stock and simmer gently for half an hour. You can prepare the soup to this stage and keep it a few hours or overnight.

Make croutons by putting the cheese onto the bread and putting under a griller for a minute or two. Put a crouton in each bowl. Immediately before serving stir the cognac through the hot soup and then pour it over the croutons.

Simple Pot Roasted French Tarragon Chicken (*Poulet à l'Estragon*)

Serves 4

1 x 2 kg chicken
salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons chopped fresh French tarragon, plus a few extra sprigs
2 tablespoons (30 g) butter, softened
1 tablespoon flour
1/2 cup (125 ml) cream
chicken stock as necessary
Preheat the oven to 180°C

Season the cavity of the chicken with salt and freshly ground black pepper and stuff a sprig of tarragon inside.

Mix 1 tablespoon of the chopped tarragon with two-thirds of the butter and set aside. Smear the rest of the butter over the breast of the chicken. Place the chicken breast side down in a casserole pot and let it brown over a gentle heat for about 5 minutes. Turn the chicken breast side up in the casserole and smear the tarragon butter over the breast and legs. Season generously with salt and pepper.



Cover the casserole and cook in the oven for 1¼ to 1½ hours. Remove the chicken to a carving dish and allow it to rest for 10 to 15 minutes before carving.

Place the pot with the juices over a medium heat. Add the remaining tablespoon of chopped tarragon to the juices in the pot, adding a tablespoon or two of chicken stock. Add in 1 tablespoon of flour and whisk until smooth, then add in the cream. Bring to the boil and whisk until the sauce thickens slightly. Taste and adjust the seasoning. Serve the chicken with the sauce spooned over.

Simple Bitter Greens salad with Roasted Pears

For salad

1 pear per person, peeled, cored, and cut lengthwise into wedges

1 ½ tablespoons olive oil

Large bag of mixed bitter greens (can contain chicory, radicchio, watercress, rocket, endives, romaine, radicchio or any lettuce you like)

Edible flowers such as rose petals, nasturtiums, violas, borage, or the flowers of herbs like basil, chives, oregano, marjoram, and rosemary

Fresh herbs - chives, basil, parsley – torn and scattered

Parmesan cheese to taste

For dressing

¾ cup olive oil

¼ cup caramelized balsamic vinegar

1-2 teaspoons of brown sugar, to taste

Add to jar and shake well.

Put oven rack in middle position and preheat oven to 200-220°C

Toss pears with oil and spread in 1 layer in a shallow baking pan, then season with salt and pepper.

Roast pears, turning over occasionally, until pears are tender and beginning to brown, 20 to 30 minutes, then cool about 15 minutes.

Toss bitter greens and flowers in a large bowl, add pears on top, then toss with dressing and parmesan cheese.

Simple Gascon Apple and Armagnac Croustade

Serves 6

8-10 large apples

1 round of shop bought puff pastry

4 sheets of shop bought filo pastry

3 tablespoons Armagnac



2 tablespoons caster sugar
2 tablespoons vanilla sugar
20g butter

Peel, core and quarter 4 apples, cut them in fine slices and soak in a tablespoon of Armagnac. Meanwhile make a compote with the remaining 6 apples by peeling, coring and cutting into cubes and then simmering with a little water and vanilla sugar for 10 to 15.

Lay puff pastry in the bottom of your flan dish and cook blind in the oven at 220°C for 15 mins. Remove the pastry from the oven and spread the apple compote over the pastry base. Then place the marinated apple slices on top of that and sprinkle a tablespoon of caster sugar over the top.

Melt the butter and mix with 2 tablespoons of Armagnac, then brush each sheet of filo with this imbued butter and lay them one by one on top of the apples, gently folding them into rippling waves as you lay them down. The last sheet can be cut into strips before placing it down to give a ribbon effect on the final tart. Cover the whole with a tablespoon of caster sugar. Cook for 20 minutes in a preheated oven at 200°C.

Spectacular Chestnut soup (*Soupe aux Chataignes*)

Soupe aux Chataignes is a very popular Gascon soup due to the abundance of sweet chestnuts which are grown here.

The primary problem of cooking with chestnuts is peeling them. The old-fashioned way is to score the chestnuts with a knife then bring to the boil in a large pan and simmer for about 10 mins, drain a few at a time and peel off the inner and outer skins while still hot.

I find it easier to boil a few days in advance and leave— the skins seem easy to remove then.

Easier still, buy a can of chestnut pureé from your best local delicatessen.

Chestnut soup (*Soupe aux Chataignes*)

Serves 6

1 kg of peeled chestnuts or can of chestnut pureé
whites of 4 leeks, washed and chopped
55g of butter
3 potatoes peeled and chopped
4 carrots peeled and chopped
3 tablespoons of crème fraîche
salt and pepper
thin slices of French bread, brushed with oil and toasted



Melt your butter in a large pan with a lid, add leeks and sweat gently for 10 minutes. Add the rest of the vegetables and chestnuts, 2 litres of water and salt and pepper, then bring to the boil. Cover and simmer for 45 mins.

Pureé with a blender and season to taste, stir in the crème fraiche, add the French bread and serve.

Spectacular Gascon Cassoulet with Duck Confit and White Beans

Serves 4

5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
250g pancetta, diced
1 medium onion, cut coarsely
1 pound dried flageolets or Great Northern beans, rinsed and picked over, then soaked for 2 hours and drained
4 thyme sprigs
2 litre chicken stock
1 large garlic, broken into cloves and peeled
salt to taste
4 pieces of duck leg confit, trimmed of excess fat
½ kg of French sausage – duck, pork, garlic – whatever you can get - sliced crosswise
100g bacon, cut into cubes
2 cups coarse fresh bread crumbs
2 tablespoons chopped parsley

In a large saucepan, heat 3 tablespoons of the olive oil. Add the pancetta and cook over moderate heat until the fat has been rendered, about 5 minutes. Add the onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 7 minutes. Add the beans, thyme sprigs and stock and bring to a boil. Simmer over low heat, stirring and skimming occasionally, until the beans are al dente, about 1 hour.

Add the garlic cloves to the beans and simmer until the garlic and beans are tender, about 15 minutes. Discard the thyme sprigs. Season the beans with salt and let cool to room temperature. Cover and refrigerate the saucepan overnight.

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Rewarm the beans over moderate heat. Transfer the beans to a large, deep baking dish. Nestle the duck legs, sausage and bacon into the beans. Bake for about 40 minutes, until the cassoulet is bubbling and all of the meats are hot. Remove from the oven and let rest for 15 minutes.

In a skillet, heat the remaining 2 tablespoons of olive oil. Add the bread crumbs and cook over moderately high heat, stirring, until browned and crisp, about 3 minutes. Sprinkle the bread crumbs and the parsley over the cassoulet and serve.



Spectacular Bitter Greens and Foie Gras salad with Roasted Pears

Serves 4

For salad

1 pear per person, peeled, cored, and cut lengthwise into wedges

1 ½ tablespoons olive oil

Large bag of mixed bitter greens (can contain chicory, radicchio, watercress, rocket, endives, romaine, radicchio or any lettuce you like)

Edible flowers such as rose petals, nasturtiums, violas, borage, or the flowers of herbs like basil, chives, oregano, marjoram, and rosemary

Fresh herbs - chives, basil, parsley – torn and scattered

For dressing

¾ cup olive oil

¼ cup caramelized balsamic vinegar

1-2 teaspoons of brown sugar, to taste

Add to jar and shake well.

Put oven rack in middle position and preheat oven to 200-220°C

Toss pears with oil and spread in 1 layer in a shallow baking pan, then season with salt and pepper.

Roast pears, turning over occasionally, until pears are tender and beginning to brown, 20 to 30 minutes, then cool about 15 minutes.

Toss bitter greens and flowers in a large bowl, add pears on top, then toss with dressing. Serve on child plates, with slices of foie gras. Drizzle with white truffle oil.

Spectacular Apple and Armagnac Croustade (Croustade à l'Armagnac aux Pommes)

around 10 tablespoons butter

6-8 large apples, peeled, cored and sliced as thin as you can

1 vanilla bean

1/4 cup sugar

1/3 cup Armagnac (use brandy or Calvados if you can't find it)

8 sheets filo dough

1/2 cup caster sugar (or more, as needed)

1/3 cup sliced almonds, divided



For this recipe, I like to use a soft-sided silicon cake pan so you can remove the cake more easily. Spray with cooking oil.

Melt 4 tablespoons of butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Place the apple slices in a bowl. Cut the vanilla bean lengthwise in half and, using the tip of a small knife, scrape the seeds over the apples and drop the pod on top. When the butter is foamy, add the apples with the vanilla and the sugar and cook, stirring very gently but frequently, until the apples are soft and caramelized, about 20 minutes. Transfer the apples to a bowl and allow them to cool to room temperature.

Heat oven to 180°C. Melt the remaining 6 tablespoons butter and set it aside.

Unfold the filo dough on your work surface and cover it with a damp towel.

Remove the top sheet of filo (re-cover the remaining sheets), brush it lightly with butter, and dust it with sugar. Gently and loosely crumple the dough into a circle and lay it into the cake pan. Sprinkle it with about one-fifth of the almonds. Repeat this procedure three more times, until you have four buttered, sugared and almond-sprinkled sheets of filo lightly layered in the cake pan.

Spoon the apples into the centre of the *croustade*, leaving a border of a few centimetres depth. Working as you did before, butter, sugar and crumple a sheet of filo, fitting it over the apples. Sprinkle this layer with the remaining almonds, and cover this with another crumpled sheet of buttered and sugared filo. Do a little styling and draping; arrange the filo so it looks good.

Slide the croustade into the oven and bake for about 10 to 12 minutes, watching the top of the tart carefully to make certain it doesn't brown too much. The top should be just lightly browned. Remove the croustade from the oven.

Increase the oven temperature to 200°C. Butter and sugar another sheet of filo, loosely crumple it and place it on the last layer to make a light, airy crown. Bake the croustade for 5 to 10 minutes, or until lightly browned, then remove it from the oven again.

Butter the last sheet of filo and, once again, crumple it to make a crown. Place it on top of the croustade and dust it heavily with the remaining powdered sugar. Return the tart to the oven and bake until the top layer caramelizes evenly, about 5 to 10 minutes. Check the progress of the sugar frequently because it can go from brown to burned in a flash. Pull the croustade from the oven as soon as the top is a golden caramel color and allow it to cool for 5 to 10 minutes.

To serve, carefully lift the croustade to a serving plate. Serve it warm with whipped cream and a few caramelised apples on the side.

