

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Like Water for Chocolate

Laura Esquivel

## About the Book

The number one bestseller in Mexico for almost two years, and subsequently a bestseller around the world, *Like Water For Chocolate* is a romantic, poignant tale, touched with moments of magic, graphic earthiness and bittersweet wit. A sumptuous feast of a novel, it relates the bizarre history of the all-female De La Garza family. Tita, the youngest daughter of the house, has been forbidden to marry, condemned by Mexican tradition to look after her mother until she dies. But Tita falls in love with Pedro, and in desperation he marries her sister Rosaura so that he can stay close to her. For the next 22 years Tita and Pedro are forced to circle each other in unconsummated passion. Only a freakish chain of tragedies, bad luck and fate finally reunite them against all the odds.

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About the Author

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# Like Water for Chocolate

Laura Esquivel

Previously published as  
*Like Water for Hot Chocolate*

*Translated by*  
CAROL CHRISTENSEN  
AND THOMAS CHRISTENSEN

*To the table or to bed  
You must come when you are bid.*



CHAPTER ONE

JANUARY

*Christmas Rolls*



## INGREDIENTS

*1 can of sardines*

*½ chorizo sausage*

*1 onion*

*oregano*

*1 can of chiles serranos*

*10 hard rolls*

## PREPARATION:

TAKE CARE TO chop the onion fine. To keep from crying when you chop it (which is so annoying!), I suggest you place a little bit on your head. The trouble with crying over an onion is that once the chopping gets you started and the tears begin to well up, the next thing you know you just can't stop. I don't know whether that's ever happened to you, but I have to confess it's happened to me, many times. Mama used to say it was because I was especially sensitive to onions, like my great-aunt, Tita.

Tita was so sensitive to onions, any time they were being chopped, they say she would just cry and cry; when she was still in my great-grandmother's belly her sobs were so loud that even Nacha, the cook, who was half-deaf, could hear them easily. Once her wailing got so violent that it brought on an early labour. And before my great-grandmother could let out a word or even a whimper, Tita made her entrance into this world, prematurely, right there on the kitchen table amid the smells of simmering noodle soup, thyme, bay leaves and coriander, steamed milk, garlic and, of course, onion. Tita had no need for the usual slap on the bottom, because she was already crying as she emerged; maybe that was because she knew then that it would be her lot in life to be denied marriage. The way Nacha tells it, Tita was literally washed into this world on a great tide of tears that spilled over the edge of the table and flooded across the kitchen floor.

That afternoon, when the uproar had subsided and the water had been dried up by the sun, Nacha swept up the residue the tears had left on the red stone floor. There was enough salt to fill a ten-pound sack - it was used for cooking and lasted a long time. Thanks to her unusual birth, Tita felt



a deep love for the kitchen, where she spent most of her life from the day she was born.

When she was only two days old, Tita's father, my great-grandfather, died of a heart attack and Mama Elena's milk dried up from the shock. Since there was no such thing as powdered milk in those days, and they couldn't find a wet nurse anywhere, they were in a panic to satisfy the infant's hunger. Nacha, who knew everything about cooking - and much more that doesn't enter the picture until later - offered to take charge of feeding Tita. She felt she had the best chance of 'educating the innocent child's stomach', even though she had never married or had children. Though she didn't know how to read or write, when it came to cooking she knew everything there was to know. Mama Elena accepted her offer gratefully; she had enough to do between her mourning and the enormous responsibility of running the ranch - and it was the ranch that would provide her children with the food and education they deserved - without having to worry about feeding a newborn baby on top of everything else.

From that day on, Tita's domain was the kitchen, where she grew vigorous and healthy on a diet of teas and thin corn gruels. This explains the sixth sense Tita developed about everything concerning food. Her eating habits, for example, were attuned to the kitchen routine: in the morning, when she could smell that the beans were ready; at midday, when she sensed the water was ready for plucking the chickens; and in the afternoon, when the dinner bread was baking, Tita knew it was time for her to be fed.

Sometimes she would cry for no reason at all, like when Nacha chopped onions, but since they both knew the cause of those tears, they didn't pay them much mind. They made them a source of entertainment, so that during her childhood Tita didn't distinguish between tears of laughter and tears of sorrow. For her laughing was a form of crying.

Likewise for Tita the joy of living was wrapped up in the delights of food. It wasn't easy for a person whose knowledge of life was based on the kitchen to comprehend the outside world. That world was an endless expanse that began at the door between the kitchen and the rest of the house, whereas everything on the kitchen side of that door, on through the door leading to the patio and the kitchen and herb gardens was completely hers – it was Tita's realm.

Her sisters were just the opposite: to them, Tita's world seemed full of unknown dangers, and they were terrified of it. They felt that playing in the kitchen was foolish and dangerous. But once Tita managed to convince them to join her in watching the dazzling display made by dancing water drops dribbled on a red-hot griddle.

While Tita was singing and waving her wet hands in time, showering drops of water down on the griddle so they would dance, Rosaura was cowering in the corner, stunned by the display. Gertrudis, on the other hand, found this game enticing, and she threw herself into it with the enthusiasm she always showed where rhythm, movement or music were involved. Then Rosaura had tried to join them – but since she barely moistened her hands and then shook them gingerly, her efforts didn't have the desired effect, so Tita tried to move her hands closer to the griddle. Rosaura resisted, and they struggled for control until Tita became annoyed and let go, but that momentum carried Rosaura's hands on to it. Tita got a terrible spanking for that, and she was forbidden to play with her sisters in her own world. Nacha became her playmate then. Together they made up all sorts of games and activities to do with cooking. Like the day they saw a man in the village plaza twisting long thin balloons into animal shapes, and they decided to do the same with sausages. They didn't just make real animals, they also made up some of their own, creatures with the neck of a swan, the legs of a dog, the tail of a horse, and on and on.

There was trouble, however, when the animals had to be taken apart to fry the sausage. Tita refused. The only time she was willing to do it was when the sausage was intended for the Christmas Rolls she loved so much. Then she not only allowed her animals to be dismantled, she watched them fry with glee.

The sausage for the rolls must be fried over very low heat, so that it cooks thoroughly without getting too brown. When done, remove from the heat and add the sardines, which have been deboned. Any black spots on the skin should also have been scraped off with a knife. Combine the onions, chopped chillies and the ground oregano with the sardines. Let the mixture stand before filling the rolls.

Tita enjoyed this step enormously; while the filling was resting, it was very pleasant to savour its aroma, for smells have the power to evoke the past, bringing back sounds and even smells that have no match in the present. Tita liked to take a deep breath and let the characteristic smoke and scent transport her through the recesses of her memory.

It was useless to try to recall the first time she had smelled one of those rolls – she couldn't, possibly because it had been before she was born. It might have been the unusual combination of sardines and sausages that had called to her and made her decide to trade the peace of ethereal existence in Mama Elena's belly, for life as her daughter, in order to enter the De la Garza family and share their delicious meals and wonderful sausage.

On Mama Elena's ranch, sausage making was a real ritual. The day before, they started peeling garlic, cleaning chillies and grinding spices. All the women in the family had to participate: Mama Elena; her daughters, Gertrudis, Rosaura and Tita; Nacha, the cook; and Chenchá, the maid. They gathered around the dining-room table in the afternoon, and between the talking and the joking the time flew by until it started to get dark. Then Mama Elena would say, 'That's it for today.'

For a good listener, it is said, a single word will suffice, so when they heard that, they all sprang into action. First they had to clear the table; then they had to assign tasks: one collected the chickens, another drew water for breakfast from the well, a third was in charge of wood for the stove. There would be no ironing, no embroidery, no sewing that day. When it was all finished, they went to their bedrooms to read, say their prayers, and go to sleep. One afternoon, before Mama Elena told them they could leave the table, Tita, who was then fifteen, announced in a trembling voice that Pedro Muzquiz would like to come and speak with her . . .

After an endless silence during which Tita's soul shrank, Mama Elena asked, 'And why should this gentleman want to talk to me?'

Tita's answer could barely be heard, 'I don't know.'

Mama Elena threw her a look that seemed to Tita to contain all the years of repression that had flowed over the family, and said, 'If he intends to ask for your hand, tell him not to bother. He'll be wasting his time and mine too. You know perfectly well that being the youngest daughter means you have to take care of me until the day I die.'

With that Mama Elena got slowly to her feet, put her glasses in her apron, and said in a tone of final command: 'That's it for today.'

Tita knew that discussion was not one of the forms of communication permitted in Mama Elena's household, but even so, for the first time in her life, she intended to protest her mother's ruling.

'But in my opinion—'

'You don't have an opinion, and that's all I want to hear about it. For generations, not a single person in my family has ever questioned this tradition, and no daughter of mine is going to be the one to start.'

Tita lowered her head, and the realization of her fate struck her as forcibly as her tears struck the table. From

then on they knew, she and the table, that they could never have even the slightest say in the unknown forces that fated Tita to bow before her mother's absurd decision, and the table to continue to receive the bitter tears that she had first shed on the day of her birth.

Still Tita did not submit. Doubts and anxieties sprang to her mind. For one thing, she wanted to know who had started this family tradition. It would be nice if she could let that genius know about one little flaw in this perfect plan for taking care of women in their old age. If Tita couldn't marry and have children, who would take care of her when she got old? Was there a solution in a case like that? Or is a daughter who stays home and takes care of her mother not expected to survive too long after the parent's death? And what about a woman who marries and can't have children, who will take care of her? And besides, she'd like to know what kind of studies had established that the youngest daughter and not the eldest is best suited to care for their mother. Had the opinion of the daughter affected by the plan ever been taken into account? If she couldn't marry, was she at least allowed to experience love? Or not even that?

Tita knew perfectly well that all these questions would have to be buried for ever in the archive of questions that have no answers. In the De la Garza family, one obeyed - immediately. Ignoring Tita completely, a very angry Mama Elena left the kitchen, and for the next week she didn't speak a single word to her.

What passed for communication between them resumed when Mama Elena, who was inspecting the clothes each of the women had been sewing, discovered that Tita's creation, which was the most perfect, had not been basted before it was sewed.

'Congratulations,' she said, 'your stitches are perfect - but you didn't baste it, did you?'

‘No,’ answered Tita, astonished that the sentence of silence had been revoked.

‘Then go and rip it out. Baste it and sew it again and then come and show it to me. And remember that the lazy man and the stingy man end up walking their road twice.’

‘But that’s if a person makes a mistake, and you yourself said a moment ago that my sewing was—’

‘Are you starting with your rebelliousness again? It’s enough that you have the audacity to break the rules in your sewing.’

‘I’m sorry, Mami. I won’t ever do it again.’

With that Tita succeeded in calming Mama Elena’s anger. For once she had been very careful; she had called her *Mami* in the correct tone of voice. Mama Elena felt that the word *Mama* had a disrespectful sound to it, and so, from the time they were little, she had ordered her daughters to use the word *Mami* when speaking to her. The only one who resisted, the only one who said the word without the proper deference was Tita, which had earned her plenty of slaps. But how perfectly she had said it this time! Mama Elena took comfort in the hope that she had finally managed to subdue her youngest daughter.

Unfortunately her hope was short-lived, for the very next day Pedro Muzquiz appeared at the house, his esteemed father at his side, to ask for Tita’s hand in marriage. His arrival caused a huge uproar, as his visit was completely unexpected. Several days earlier Tita had sent Pedro a message via Nacha’s brother asking him to abandon his suit. The brother swore he had delivered the message to Pedro, and yet there they were, in the house. Mama Elena received them in the living room; she was extremely polite and explained why it was impossible for Tita to marry.

‘But if you really want Pedro to get married, allow me to suggest my daughter Rosaura, who’s just two years older than Tita. *She* is one hundred per cent available, and ready for marriage . . .’

At that Chenchá almost dropped right on to Mama Elena the tray containing coffee and cookies, which she had carried into the living room. Excusing herself, she rushed back to the kitchen, where Tita, Rosaura and Gertrudis were waiting for her to fill them in on every detail about what was going on in the living room. She burst headlong into the room, and they all stopped what they were doing, so as not to miss a word she said.

They were together in the kitchen making Christmas Rolls. As the name implies, these rolls are usually prepared around Christmas, but today they were being prepared in honour of Tita's birthday. She would soon be sixteen years old, and she wanted to celebrate with one of her favourite dishes.

'Isn't that something? Your ma talks about being ready for marriage like she was dishing up a plate of enchiladas! And the worst thing is, they're completely different! You can't just switch tacos and enchiladas like that!'

Chenchá kept up this kind of running commentary as she told the others - in her own way, of course - about the scene she had just witnessed. Tita knew Chenchá sometimes exaggerated and distorted things, so she held her aching heart in check. She would not accept what she had just heard. Feigning calm, she continued cutting the rolls for her sisters and Nacha to fill.

It is best to use home-made rolls. Hard rolls can easily be obtained from a bakery, but they should be small; the larger ones are unsuited for this recipe. After filling the rolls, bake for ten minutes and serve hot. For best results, leave the rolls out overnight, wrapped in a cloth, so that the grease from the sausage soaks into the bread.

While Tita finished wrapping the next day's rolls, Mama Elena came into the kitchen and informed them that she had agreed to Pedro's marriage - to Rosaura.

Hearing Chenchá's story confirmed, Tita felt her body fill with a wintry chill: in one sharp, quick blast she was so cold and dry her cheeks burned and turned red, red as the

apples beside her. That overpowering chill lasted a long time, and she could find no respite, not even when Nacha told her what she had overheard as she escorted Don Pascual Muzquiz and his son to the ranch's gate. Nacha followed them, walking as quietly as she could in order to hear the conversation between father and son. Don Pascual and Pedro were walking slowly, speaking in low, controlled, angry voices.

'Why did you do that, Pedro? It will look ridiculous, your agreeing to marry Rosaura. What happened to the eternal love you swore to Tita? Aren't you going to keep that vow?'

'Of course I'll keep it. When you're told there's no way you can marry the woman you love, and your only hope of being near her is to marry her sister, wouldn't you do the same?'

Nacha didn't manage to hear the answer; Pulque, the ranch dog, went running by, barking at a rabbit he mistook for a cat.

'So you intend to marry without love?'

'No, Papa, I am going to marry with a great love for Tita that will never die.'

Their voices grew less and less audible, drowned out by the crackling of dried leaves beneath their feet. How strange that Nacha, who was quite hard of hearing by that time, should have claimed to have heard this conversation. Still, Tita thanked Nacha for telling her - but that did not alter the icy feelings she began to have for Pedro. It is said that the deaf can't hear but can understand. Perhaps Nacha only heard what everyone else was afraid to say. Tita could not get to sleep that night; she could not find the words for what she was feeling. How unfortunate that black holes in space had not yet been discovered, for then she might have understood the black hole in the centre of her chest, infinite coldness flowing through it.

Whenever she closed her eyes she saw scenes from last Christmas, the first time Pedro and his family had been invited to dinner; the scenes grew more and more vivid, and



the cold within her grew sharper. Despite the time that had passed since that evening, she remembered it perfectly: the sounds, the smells, the way her new dress had grazed the freshly waxed floor, the look Pedro gave her . . . That look! She had been walking to the table carrying a tray of egg-yolk candies when she first felt his hot gaze burning her skin. She turned her head, and her eyes met Pedro's. It was then she understood how dough feels when it is plunged into boiling oil. The heat that invaded her body was so real she was afraid she would start to bubble - her face, her stomach, her heart, her breasts - like batter, and unable to endure his gaze she lowered her eyes and hastily crossed the room, to where Gertrudis was pedalling the pianola, playing a waltz called 'The Eyes of Youth'. She set her tray on a little table in the middle of the room, picked up a glass of Noyo liqueur that was in front of her, hardly aware of what she was doing, and sat down next to Paquita Lobo, the De la Garzas' neighbour. But even that distance between herself and Pedro was not enough; she felt her blood pulsing, searing her veins. A deep flush suffused her face and no matter how she tried she could not find a place for her eyes to rest. Paquita saw that something was bothering her, and with a look of great concern, she asked, 'That liqueur is pretty strong, isn't it?'

'Pardon me?'

'You look a little woozy, Tita. Are you feeling all right?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'You're old enough to have a little drink on a special occasion, but tell me, you little devil, did your mama say it was OK? I can see you're excited - you're shaking - and I'm sorry but I must say you'd better not have any more. You wouldn't want to make a fool of yourself.'

That was the last straw! To have Paquita Lobo think she was drunk. She couldn't allow the tiniest suspicion to remain in Paquita's mind or she might tell her mother. Tita's fear of her mother was enough to make her forget Pedro for a

moment, and she applied herself to convincing Paquita, any way she could, that she was thinking clearly, that her mind was alert. She chatted with her, she gossiped, she made small talk. She even told her the recipe for this Noyo liqueur which was supposed to have had such an effect on her. The spirit is made by soaking four ounces of peaches and half a pound of apricots in water for twenty-four hours to loosen the skin; next, they are peeled, crushed and steeped in hot water for fifteen days. Then the spirit is distilled. After two and a half pounds of sugar have been completely dissolved in the water, four ounces of orange-flower water are added, and the mixture is stirred and strained. And so there would be no lingering doubts about her mental and physical well-being, she reminded Paquita, as if it were just an aside, that the water containers held 2.016 litres, no more and no less.

So when Mama Elena came over to ask Paquita if she was being properly entertained, she replied enthusiastically.

‘Oh yes, perfectly! You have such wonderful daughters. Such fascinating conversation!’

Mama Elena sent Tita to the kitchen to get something for the guests. Pedro ‘happened’ to be walking by at that moment and he offered his help. Tita rushed off to the kitchen without a word. His presence made her extremely uncomfortable. He followed her in, and she quickly sent him off with one of the trays of delicious snacks that had been waiting on the kitchen table.

She would never forget the moment their hands accidentally touched as they both slowly bent down to pick up the same tray.

That was when Pedro confessed his love.

‘Señorita Tita, I would like to take advantage of this opportunity to be alone with you to tell you that I am deeply in love with you. I know this declaration is presumptuous, and that it’s quite sudden, but it’s so hard to get near you that I decided to tell you tonight. All I ask is that you tell me whether I can hope to win your love.’

'I don't know what to say . . . give me time to think.'

'No, no, I can't! I need an answer now: you don't have to think about love; you either feel it or you don't. I am a man of few words, but my word is my pledge. I swear that my love for you will last for ever. What about you? Do you feel the same way about me?'

'Yes!'

Yes, a thousand times. From that night on she would love him for ever. And now she had to give him up. It wasn't decent to desire your sister's future husband. She had to try to put him out of her mind somehow, so she could get to sleep. She started to eat the Christmas Roll Nacha had left on her bureau, along with a glass of milk; this remedy had proven effective many times. Nacha, with all her experience, knew that for Tita there was no pain that wouldn't disappear if she ate a delicious Christmas Roll. But this time it didn't work. She felt no relief from the hollow sensation in her stomach. Just the opposite, a wave of nausea flowed over her. She realized that the hollow sensation was not hunger but an icy feeling of grief. She had to get rid of that terrible sensation of cold. First she put on a wool robe and a heavy cloak. The cold still gripped her. Then she put on felt slippers and another two shawls. No good. Finally she went to her sewing box and pulled out the bedspread she had started the day Pedro first spoke of marriage. A bedspread like that, a crocheted one, takes about a year to complete. Exactly the length of time Pedro and Tita had planned to wait before getting married. She decided to use the yarn, not to let it go to waste, and so she worked on the bedspread and wept furiously, weeping and working until dawn and threw it over herself. It didn't help at all. Not that night, nor many others, for as long as she lived, could she free herself from that cold.



TO BE  
CONTINUED . . .

Next month's recipe:  
*Chabela Wedding Cake*