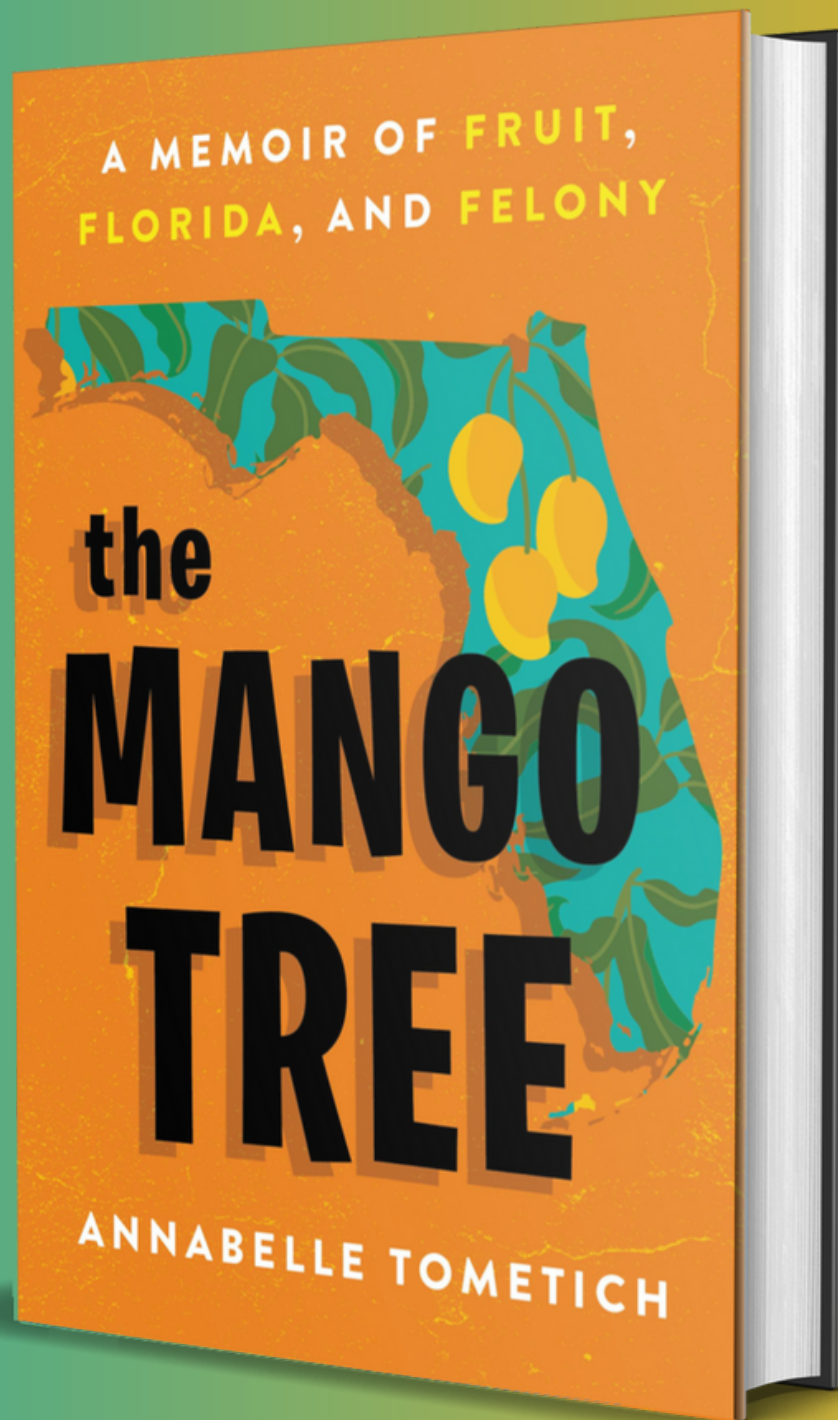




# ***THE MANGO TREE***

## ***BOOK CLUB KIT***







***Hello dear readers,***

If you're reading this, then the unfathomable has happened: My book has made it beyond the aluminum borders of my laptop and into the world. And by "book," I mean heart.

*The Mango Tree: A Memoir of Fruit, Florida, and Felony* is the thing that scared me most to write. This memoir is my whole unabashed self and tangled mess of a family spread across 305 pages. It's the twists and turns and darkness. It's the joys and juicy-sweet deliciousness, too.

When my Filipina mother used her BB rifle, the one usually reserved for sniping pesky squirrels, to shoot out the truck window of a white man she claims was stealing her precious mangoes, I thought: I hope no one ever finds out about this. Hours later, when the breaking-news reporter from the newspaper where I worked as a restaurant critic called, asking if this Josefina Tometich was related to me, I thought: *Well, shit.*

Growing up half-Filipina and half-white in Robert E. Lee County, Florida, I yearned to blend in, meld. With the pull of a trigger, my mom made that much more difficult. At the end of the call, the reporter asked one last question, colleague to colleague: "Did she really shoot at that guy—over a mango?" I told him the truth: "It's complicated." And, as *The Mango Tree* shows, it is.

This book is for anyone who has struggled to figure out themselves, their families, and where they belong. It's for the curious and the empathic, for those hungry for understanding. If you love mangoes, that helps.

I hope you cherish this book, this heart of mine, as much as I do. I hope you savor every word. But if you gobble it up, that's cool. I'll understand.

Thank you!  
**Annabelle**





# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As a kid, Annabelle becomes obsessed with numbers and counting. She's always trying to make things add up. Do you think Annabelle shed this quirk as she got older? What coping mechanisms did your younger self devise to deal with difficult circumstances?
2. Describe the role of motherhood in this memoir. How does the relationship Annabelle has with her mother influence the choices she makes growing up?
3. As she recounts her upbringing, Annabelle also describes her complicated relationship with her father. What makes their bond so complex? How does it relate to Annabelle's relationship with her mixed-race background and her identity as a daughter?
4. Throughout the memoir, and especially once Annabelle goes to the Philippines with her mother, we see family members wrestle with what it means for someone to leave their ancestral homeland. How has that played a role in the family and what does it mean for both Annabelle and her mother? What does it mean for Annabelle's extended family?
5. Two of Annabelle's closest confidants and friends when she was a child were her grandmother, Josephine, and her best friend, Cathy. These two served very different roles in Annabelle's young life. How do these characters compare and contrast? How does the push and pull of their personalities and life circumstances shape Annabelle as a kid?



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

7. At various points, we see Annabelle and many of her family members experience feelings of isolation—because they were not sure where they fit in as they grew up, or because they had moved from the Philippines and were essentially starting over. Where and how did they find community and connection?
8. When she finds a promising-looking mango seedling in the yard (p.69), Annabelle's mother, Josefina, tells Annabelle, "Do not touch this...I need this to grow." What do you think the promise of a mango seedling means to Josefina?
9. Mangoes—and food in general—play a key role throughout the memoir, showing how Annabelle's relationship with her mother and her Filipino roots develops over time. What significance does food play in your life and relationships?
10. Annabelle often references the idea of "normality" (example on p.146); what is her definition of "normality," and how does it change throughout the memoir? By the end of the memoir, how have her feelings on wishing to be "normal" evolved?
11. Annabelle's path to becoming a restaurant critic is hardly linear. First she set out to be a doctor, then she worked as a cook, caterer, sportswriter, and finally a food critic. How did each of these trajectories influence her final one? What winding roads have your lives taken?



# MANGO SHOOTER

When you googled “mango shooter” on god’s internet in late June 2015, the first result showed [my mother’s mugshot](#) next to the headline “Mango leads to Fort Myers woman’s arrest.” The story, from the same newspaper where I worked as a food writer and restaurant critic, detailed the BB gun my mom used to shoot out a man’s car window after he tried to take some of her precious mangoes.

The second Google result: an Absolut Vodka recipe for a [Mango Shooter](#) cocktail. Of course.

I remember clicking the Absolut link back then, thinking it might be funny to serve Mango Shooters at our next family potluck. But the recipe wasn’t quite a recipe, more like: take a shot of vodka; eat a piece of mango — which felt like sound advice at the time.

But I knew I could do better. My Mango Shooter uses freshly pureed mangoes (ideally sourced with consent from a friendly South Florida mango grower), as well as an optional choice of alcohols. The black peppercorns give the drink spice, depth and a BB pellet vibe that, all these years later, is indeed quite funny.



# MANGO SHOOTER

## Ingredients

- Ice
- 1.5 ounces mango puree\*
- 1-2 twists of freshly cracked black pepper
- 1 ounce freshly squeezed lime juice
- Sparkling water/club soda
- 2 ounces liquor (I prefer tequila or gin, but vodka or even rum are also delicious; replace the liquor with water for a booze-free version)
- 1 ounce simple syrup (optional)
- For garnish: 3-4 whole black peppercorns, slice of lime

## Directions

To a cocktail shaker, add a large handful of ice, mango puree, cracked black pepper, lime juice and liquor. Cover and shake vigorously for 15 to 20 seconds or until the shaker is frosty cold and stinging your hands. Strain the mixture into a rocks glass with fresh ice. Top with sparkling water and garnish with peppercorns and lime slice.

\*Mango puree: Peel and pit 2-3 ripe mangoes. Add to a blender or food processor with the juice of 1/2 a lime and 1 tablespoon of water (use more if you like your puree less viscous). If the mangoes aren't especially sweet, add a squeeze of honey. Puree until smooth.







# MANGO CHUTNEY

This chutney balances the sweetness of mangoes with the tart slap of vinegar. Its spicy-sweet acidity is the perfect balance for fatty pork chops. The chutney is equally delicious on cream-cheese schmear bagels or as a dip for fried tofu.

## Ingredients

- 2 teaspoons cooking oil
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 2-3 mangoes, peeled and cubed
- ⅓ cup golden raisins
- ¼ cup crystallized ginger
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon whole mustard seeds
- ¼ teaspoon chili flakes
- ½ to 1 cup sugar
- ½ cup vinegar (white, red or apple cider)
- cornstarch slurry (1-2 tablespoons cornstarch mixed with 1-2 tablespoons cool water); optional

## Directions

Heat oil in a medium to large saucepan over medium heat. Sauté onion and garlic until soft and translucent. Add mango, raisins, ginger, cinnamon, mustard seeds and chili flakes, and stir until well combined.

Stir in sugar and vinegar. Bring the mix to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 30 to 45 minutes or until it's reduced to your desired thickness. For a jammier chutney, add a touch of cornstarch slurry for further thickening.

Cool and store in the fridge for up to 2 months.





# Q&A WITH ANNABELLE

**Little, Brown:** You were on a newspaper staff for 18 years, writing for various beats, including food; do you think it made it any easier to write a ~300-page book? (Not for nothing, the way you write about food in *The Mango Tree* is fantastic, it's vivid, and it brings us as readers right into the room with you.)

**Annabelle Tometich:** OK 1: *Thank you! I'm blushing!!* And 2: Yes, I fully credit my career in local journalism for giving me the patience and wherewithal to write this book. One of the beauties of working in journalism is how often you GET to write. I wrote upwards of 10 stories a week at one point. It was trial by fire from day one, and my harshest critics were my readers. They did not hold back. I learned quickly (thanks to Betty from Sanibel) that eke and eek are not the same thing, and that nobody eeks out a living, "except for maybe yodelers," her words, not mine.

I started in journalism as a high school sportswriter, then moved into food and restaurants. My sports days taught me to write *anywhere* — in my car, a gymnasium, the closest McDonald's with decent WiFi. Sports and food gave me the ability to recognize what is a story and what isn't, and the skills to tell those stories with nuance and detail. Journalism also gave me some of the most amazing editors and mentors, people who weren't afraid to tell me when my writing sucked, why it sucked, and how I could make it better, which is crucial.

I still think of their advice to this day. Even that old reporter's adage, "Always get the name of the dog," is a reminder to write with detail, to set a scene for the reader that draws them in and makes them want to linger.

**LB:** What were some challenges you faced as you were writing your memoir?

**AT:** I sometimes call *The Mango Tree* a midlife crisis, which is only mildly hyperbolic. I started the project in 2019, when I was 39. I had come to the realization that, for better or worse, I was going to be living in my hometown of Fort Myers, Florida for quite a bit longer.







# Q&A WITH ANNABELLE

I was 14 years into my job as a journalist, and I didn't want restaurant reviews and high school baseball profiles to define my career. I wanted something more. I thought, if I'm stuck here, what else can I do? And then, perhaps foolishly, I figured: Hey! Let's write a book!


*The Mango Tree* actually started as a cookbook, because that's what felt right to me as a food writer at the time. But I soon realized that recipes for mango ice pops don't blend well with dead-dad anecdotes. When I figured out what the story really was, this mango tree and how it so powerfully shaped my life, the book came pouring out of me. I wrote the bulk of it from June to September of 2020, in the thick of the pandemic. I waited for my husband and kids to go to bed and sat criss-cross applesauce on my lumpy couch for hours — clacking away at my laptop.

Looking back, those late nights are a blur. But this book is a pretty sweet reminder that it did indeed happen, and that maybe I wasn't so foolish after all.

**LB: Are there other memoirs that inspired you to write your own? Or inspired you as you were writing?**

**AT:** So many. *Monsoon Mansion* by Cinelle Barnes and *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls* by T Kira Madden are two of the memoirs that made this book feel possible.

Before reading Cinelle's and T Kira's words, I felt like: Who really needs my story? But after being so profoundly moved and feeling so seen by them and their books, both of which touch on other-ness, the strains of family, and the necessity of empathy, I realized the power of this form and the strength that comes from honesty, vulnerability and beautiful storytelling. Another memoir I have to mention is *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon, which is a flat-out brilliant book that, for me, served as a reminder that everything we write is to someone, for someone. And to write with intent, we must bear this in mind.





# Q&A WITH ANNABELLE

**LB: What was it like being a food writer/restaurant reviewer? Were there any meals/reviewing experiences that feel especially emblematic of South Florida, or of your tenure as Jean Le Boeuf?**

**AT:** I can't tell you how many times I'd be at a restaurant review pinching myself. I could not believe I was being paid to eat. I never, speaking of intent, intended to go down that path. I was supposed to be a doctor, then I got rejected from medical school and became a line cook/server/caterer, then a sportswriter, then I went into food writing and restaurant criticism. I worked in restaurants for almost a decade, and I think that brought a lot of empathy to my work as a critic (I wrote my reviews as "Jean Le Boeuf," a pseudonym that made me sound like a Frenchman; a convenient hiding place for a half-Filipina with severe imposter syndrome).

Early on as Jean, it was easy to pan a restaurant. But with age came wisdom and the realization that not every meal had to be written about. Certain high-profile chefs/concepts might benefit from a harsh-yet-honest review, but a local mom-and-pop that's barely scraping by would not. That was an epiphany that changed a lot for me. It allowed me to bring more of my voice into my reviews, even if they were published under Jean's name.

As for "especially emblematic" South Florida meals, the very first review that I was ever part of was of the then-new Pollo Tropical in Cape Coral. We ordered 3/4 of the menu and waited at least 30 minutes for our food to arrive. I slathered everything in cilantro-garlic and curry-mustard sauces, gobbled up the fried yuca, and ate every wobbly bit of flan. That's about as South Florida as it gets.

**LB: How is your current relationship with mangoes?**

**AT:** Ha! As complicated as ever. Now, mangoes spike my blood sugar and give me heartburn if I eat too many (yay middle age!), but I still love them. A freshly plucked mango, still warm from the sun, all slipperiness and juice, there's nothing better.

