

READING GROUP GUIDE



Chef's Choice

by TJ ALEXANDER

This reading group guide for CHEF'S CHOICE includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author TJ Alexander. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

INTRODUCTION

A fake-dating arrangement turns to real love in this deliciously delightful queer rom-com from the author of the sweetly satisfying *Chef's Kiss*.

When Luna O'Shea is unceremoniously fired from her frustrating office job, she tries to count her blessings: she's a proud trans woman who has plenty of friends, a wonderful roommate, and a good life in New York City. But blessings don't pay the bills.

Enter Jean-Pierre, a laissez-faire trans man and the heir to a huge culinary empire—which he'll only inherit *if* he can jump through the hoops his celebrity chef grandfather has placed in his path. First hoop: he needs a girlfriend, a role that Luna is happy to play ... for the right price. She's got rent to pay, after all! Second hoop: they both need to learn how to cook a series of elaborate, world-renowned family recipes to prove that Jean-Pierre is a worthy heir. Admittedly, Luna doesn't even know how to crack an egg, but she's not going to let that—or any pesky feelings for Jean-Pierre—stop her.

Another swoon-worthy and heartwarming queer love story from a charming new voice in romance.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Luna and Jean-Pierre are like oil and water in many ways. Although this makes them approach life quite differently, it also makes them very well suited to each other in a classic example of opposites attracting. Describe each character's qualities and why their differences make them a strong couple.
2. Luna's mother is a huge part of Luna's life, but sometimes her delivery is off, even when she means well. When Luna tells her mother about Jean-Pierre, she says, "I think it's pretty neat, him being transgender too and all. You match!" How does this language miss the mark, even when Luna's mother believes she is being supportive? Why do you think the author included this scene?
3. In Chapter 7, Luna thinks, "Remember, this is just a job ... Keep it professional. This is a total stranger. He's just your fake boyfriend." How does the transactional nature of this relationship affect their actions towards each other? How are they able to get past it?
4. While Jean-Pierre, Luna, and Luna's mother are out to brunch, the waiter misgenders Jean-Pierre. Why do you think the author included this scene? Do you think the situation should have been handled differently by anyone involved?
5. When Jean-Pierre says, "I have to believe, my Clair... that fate would have brought us together no matter what. To think otherwise is too painful to contemplate," readers get a glimpse into Jean-Pierre's budding feelings for Luna. Do you believe in fate? Why or why not?
6. In Chapter 9, Jean-Pierre says, "I am un homme. You are une femme. Transgender or not, that makes us a straight couple," which Luna disagrees with and replies, "There is so much to unpack there, I'm going to need a fucking bellhop." Discuss the significance of this conversation in the context of gender and sexuality and what you think the author is trying to convey.
7. On a night out in New York City, Luna is discriminated against and isn't let into a club. While she immediately turns to leave, Jean-Pierre demands answers and entry into the club. Discuss their different stances and why they each react the way they do.
8. Jean-Pierre's strained family relationships come to a head at the end of the novel. He says to his father, "You were trying to get me into a club I have no interest in entering ... I do not need the respect of Papi ... I have my own." Discuss this turning point in Jean-Pierre's life and what it means for his future.

9. While *Chef's Choice* tackles big, important topics, such as gender and sexual identity, family dynamics, class, and allyship, it is also a very funny novel. In what ways do characters use humor to get through challenging moments, and how do their senses of humor help you understand them better?
10. Which of the dishes and baked goods described in the novel would you most like to try? What techniques does TJ Alexander use to make the food sound enticing and delicious? Are there any recipes you plan to try making yourself?
11. What do you think Luna and Jean-Pierre's relationship will look like in the coming years? How do you think they will grow and create a life together?
12. TJ Alexander said they want to write novels about queer joy. In what ways is this a joyful novel?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Select one of the mouthwatering recipes that Luna and Jean-Pierre are tasked with mastering, and try making it yourself! Or better yet, have each book club member make a dish inspired by the book!
2. *Chef's Choice* has an utterly charming cast of diverse and relatable characters. What actors would you cast for the screen version? Discuss with your book club whether it should be a film or TV series.
3. Visit @tjalexandernyc on Instagram/Twitter and tjalexander.com for more information on *Chef's Choice*. Consider inviting TJ to Zoom with your book club.

A CONVERSATION WITH TJ ALEXANDER

Q: *Chef's Choice* is your second queer rom-com. How did the writing process differ from how you approached writing *Chef's Kiss*?

A: Well, it was certainly a different experience to write a book on purpose! *Chef's Kiss* wasn't exactly an accident, but it did start out as a fun, private exercise that I wasn't sure anyone would actually read. I knew people were going to read *Chef's Choice* before I even started writing it (You're one of them! Hello!), so that changed things. In some ways it was more pressure, but in other ways it was good to have that focus. Like, okay, game time, let's write this thing for real! Also, writing from an actual outline and not Just Vibes is a big shift. I like it now and will probably keep doing it, but it's definitely a different lifestyle.

Q: *Chef's Choice* takes place in the same universe as *Chef's Kiss*. Can you describe what it was like to return to this setting and give readers a taste of Simone's and Ray's lives while also focusing on telling Luna and Jean-Pierre's story?

A: It was very comforting to come home to the *Chef*'verse. I felt so lucky to get the chance to extend Simone's and Ray's fictional lives a tad, which was lovely, but what I was most excited about was giving Luna her starring role. She was clamoring for it all through *Chef's Kiss*; I could tell she wanted to be a main character. And I felt kind of guilty, like, girl, please be patient, I swear I'll give you your moment. Thank god I did.

Q: How did you develop Luna and Jean-Pierre as characters? Were you inspired by people you know or were they completely imagined?

A: I would say they're both 99 percent imagined. It's funny because lots of people who know us assume I based Luna on my wife, but my wife doesn't do yoga or believe in astrology or any of that Luna-ish stuff. She does like cheese, but who doesn't. Jean-Pierre is a funny case. He's mentioned very briefly, not even by name, in *Chef's Kiss*. At that time, I didn't intend for him to ever be fleshed out into a real character. It was only when I sat down and said, "Okay, let's give Luna her love story. Who am I going to pair her with?" that I hit upon the idea of taking that tiny kernel of a character and turning him into this romantic hero. I went through the whole roster of minor characters from *Chef's Kiss* before I landed on that, though! In some alternate dimension, Luna could have ended up with Petey or Kelsey. Lucky for JP, I remembered that one line of dialog.

Q: Why did you decide on a romance between a trans man and trans woman? What about this dynamic is unique and something you were excited to explore on the page?

A: I think T4T couples are pretty great because I'm part of one! You don't often see a relationship like that in media, and I wanted to show readers what it could look like. Also, I heard a few comments on *Chef's Kiss* saying that the discussions of gender were pretty basic—and that was true! Simone, like many people I love, really needed Gender 101. But I was excited to have Luna and Jean-Pierre taking it a step further and arguing about trans issues on the page. It's fictional and obviously heightened for comedy, but these are facets of trans life. We have lots of arguments about this stuff because we're kind of ersatz professors of gender theory, and we think about it a little more than your average cis person.

Q: Luna and Jean-Pierre are tasked with making extremely complex, exquisite dishes—from Braised Saddle of Rabbit to Duck Leg Confit with Foie Gras Terrine to Gâteau Marjolaine à la Aubert. How did you come up with these gourmet recipes? Have you made any of the recipes yourself?

A: Heck NO, I haven't made any of Chef Henri's recipes! All of them, apart from the marjolaine cake, are completely invented by me as jokes. Coming up with them was a fun day in the writing room, actually! I was lucky enough to have some friends who had worked in fine dining in the past, so I talked with them about the fiddliest things they'd made, and I also looked up a few old menus from Michelin-starred restaurants (though I won't name names) to find the most ridiculous descriptions. I have all the respect in the world for fine dining chefs; they have a very difficult job, but even they would admit some of these dishes they're putting out sound pretty silly. Anyway, please do not attempt to make these fictional dishes. I don't think you can even whip ramps. You can try, but I think it would be disappointing! They're so much better unwhipped.

Q: Do you have any hopes for what trans and nonbinary readers will take away from this? And for cisgender (queer or straight) readers?

A: I hope trans and nonbinary folks get a good chuckle or two out of this book! A fun time, a little reprieve. A chance to maybe see themselves as heroes in a story, but if they don't, that's okay too. Cis readers? I mean, I love y'all, but not everything's about you, hahaha! I hope you enjoy a peek into this world. You're welcome! (Maybe it's too much to hope that a fun read will galvanize cis people into caring about the rising terror of anti-trans legislation in America, but hey, that would also be cool. I don't care what you do to help us, cis folks, but please do something.)

Q: You've created a beautifully diverse and authentic cast of characters in different stages of their lives who are navigating love, life, and loss in different ways. Who was your favorite character to write and why?

A: Ray has the highest joke density of any character (still!) so they're always fun to write, but I think Jean-Pierre is my current favorite child. He's kind, he's arrogant, he's weird, he's over-caffeinated, he's too French for this world—he's my sweet cheese, my rotten solidier, etc. He ended up having this incredibly strong voice, which I really wasn't expecting, but since he had to stand up against Luna, who is Main Character Distilled, he had to grow into this fully formed guy. I'm really proud of him, you know?

Q: The dedication of *Chef's Choice* reads, "Actually, this one's for me." Explain!

A: Fine, gosh! (Bit pushy, but all right.) When I sat down to plot out this book, unsure if my agent or editor or anyone would actually go for it, I had that little voice in my head telling me this was a bad idea, that it was too silly, too self-indulgent, too selfish. That voice sucks. That voice can go to hell, honestly. And after a lifetime of trying to make other people happy, I think I can stand to be a little selfish now. I wrote that dedication to remind myself that my stories are for me first and the rest of the world second. Luna and Jean-Pierre exist because I needed them, and sharing them is a gift, not a burden.

Also, it sounds pretty badass, that dedication, doesn't it?

Q: What are you working on next?

A: My third book, *Second Chances in New Port Stephen*, is out this December! So get ready for a second chance rom-com about a trans guy who returns to his Florida hometown for Christmas and falls back in love with his first boyfriend.

JEAN-PIERRE'S APOLOGY JALAPEÑO MAC AND CHEESE

Ingredients

1 lb small pasta (like cavatappi)	½ teaspoon nutmeg
4 cups milk	¼ teaspoon cayenne
6 tablespoons butter, divided	1 ½ cups unsalted pretzels, processed into crumbs
¼ cup flour	½ teaspoon garlic powder
1 cup brie, diced small	handful fresh parsley, chopped
1 cup Gruyere, grated	⅓ cup parmesan, grated
1 cup sharp cheddar, grated	salt & pepper
6 oz (or to taste) pickled jalapeños, diced	

Directions

1. Coat a 13x9 baking dish with cooking spray. Preheat oven to 375.
Cook the pasta in salted boiling water according to package directions.
2. Melt 4 tablespoons butter in a large saucepan over low heat and add flour. Cook, stirring with whisk, for two minutes.
3. Slowly whisk in milk while stirring. Allow to simmer, whisking until mixture thickens.
4. Off heat, add cheeses a handful at a time, whisking until melted. Add jalapeños, nutmeg, and cayenne. Taste and add salt & pepper as needed.
5. Combine cooked pasta with sauce and pour into prepared baking dish.
6. Melt remaining 2 tablespoons butter in small pan and toast the pretzel crumbs along with the garlic powder. Remove from heat and combine parsley and parmesan with toasted crumbs.
7. Add crumb topping to mac and cheese and bake in preheated oven for about 30 minutes or until bubbly and golden brown.