

# TJ ALEXANDER

“A luscious dessert of a novel.”

—**CAMILLE PERRI**, author of  
*When Katie Met Cassidy*

READING  
GROUP  
GUIDE

An illustration of two chefs in a bakery. On the left, a man with short blonde hair, wearing a white shirt and a red apron, is looking down at something in his hands. On the right, a woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a pink shirt and a white apron with a yellow bow, is looking towards the camera. The background is a light blue wall with shelves displaying various cakes and pastries. The title "Chef's Kiss" is written in large, dark blue, cursive letters across the center of the image. In the bottom right corner, the text "A NOVEL" is written in small, white, capital letters.

# Chef's Kiss

A NOVEL



This reading group guide for *Chef's Kiss* 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*

Simone Larkspur is a perfectionist pastry expert with a dream job at The Discerning Chef, a venerable cookbook and cooking magazine publisher in New York City. All she wants to do is create the perfect loaf of sourdough and develop recipes, but when The Discerning Chef decides to bring their brand into the twenty-first century by pivoting to video, Simone is thrust into the spotlight and finds herself failing at something for the first time in her life.

To make matters worse, Simone has to deal with Ray Lyton, the new test kitchen manager, whose obnoxious cheer and outgoing personality are like oil to Simone's water. Watch Simone learn about vulnerability, community, what it means to be seen, and what it means to see someone for who they really are.

## Discussion Questions

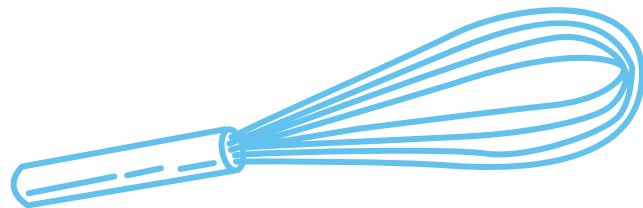
1. At moments of stress, Simone turns to baking. She thinks to herself, "It was therapeutic...She imagined the bowl held all her frustrations. The expectations of the digital world. The fact that the rug had been pulled out from under her feet overnight" (p. 32). What about baking is so therapeutic for Simone and why? How does it influence the way she interacts with the world?
2. Simone and Ray 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 characters' qualities and why their differences make them a strong couple.
3. Simone notes that Ray signals their queerness with a pride bracelet and reflects on her own: "Simone, who had considered the matter very seriously before deciding at age ten that she must be bisexual, didn't care to make a fuss about it" (p. 14), and "unmentioned-in-polite-company bisexuality" (p. 19) has long been part of her identity. Despite her self-awareness around her bisexuality developing at a young age, why do you think Simone is private (or even protective) about it into adulthood?
4. Chase describes his vision for the upcoming video project as "Practical. Lucrative. Scalable. Uniformity" (p. 26). Do any of these concepts seem to align with Simone's personality and vision for TDC? Which ones do, and which ones don't? What about Chase makes him someone Simone clashes with at work?
5. Simone shares with us the "second rule of the Larkspur-O'Shea household": "Pay Luna in Tasty Food and Baked Goods for Emotional Labor Including but Not Limited to Discussion of Trans Issues" (p. 48). What about Luna's emotional (and intellectual) labor warrants some type of compensation from Simone? How does it differ from other kinds of emotional labor between friends?
6. *"I understand you are a friendly person. Please extend the same understanding to me when I say I am only interested in work when I am in the test kitchen. You are my colleague, and that's it."* What do you think of Simone's delivery of this message to Ray on page 53? Why do you think she said it this way, and would you have said it similarly or differently?



7. There are many wonderful secondary characters in *Chef's Kiss*. Who did you most enjoy seeing interact with Ray and Simone, and how did they help you get to know our main couple better? Are any of them characters you'd like to see star in their own rom-com? What about them made you enjoy their presence so much in the novel?
8. "Maybe it was just laziness, not wanting to bother with any milk" (p. 69), Simone thinks as she tries to reason why Ray would give her a black coffee, exactly the way she likes. Why does she assume the worst about them at this point in the novel?
9. "Ray is not a fluke" (p. 98), Simone asserts to Pim Gladly when Chase reduces Ray's online success to luck. Why does Simone feel empowered to defend them in this moment?
10. In Chapter 16, Ray comes out to Simone. Describe the circumstances that led to them coming out. What responsibility do the people at TDC hold in putting Ray in that position? What could have been done to avoid this?
11. 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?
12. We only see the beginnings of Ray and Simone's romance—what do you think their relationship will look like in the upcoming years? How do you think they will grow and create a life together?
13. "It has come to our attention that certain individuals are pushing the boundaries of professionalism...forc[ing] personal intimate details of their lives onto their coworkers. This is harassment." What is uniquely prejudiced but also inaccurate about this email from TDC's HR department concerning Ray on page 177?
14. While *Chef's Kiss* tackles big, important topics, such as gender and sexual identity, workplace discrimination, and allyship, it is also a very funny novel. What were your favorite funny lines? Was there one character in particular who made you laugh most? In what ways do characters use humor to get through challenging moments, and how do their senses of humor help you understand them better?
15. TJ Alexander said they want to write novels about queer joy. In what ways is this a joyful novel?

## Enhance Your Book Club

1. Reflect on Simone's response to Ray's coming out. In what ways was Simone supportive of Ray? Consider researching nonbinary and trans allyship on the websites of organizations like the Trevor Project or GLAAD and discuss what you learned about how to support people in your life who may come out to you.
2. Come up with the perfect three- or five-course meal to symbolize the journey of Ray and Simone.
3. "That part where they made the women sing and then the men...I hate that there wasn't a place for Ray to sing" (p. 164–65), Simone tells Luna. Think about the ways in which our society defaults to the gender binary. What are everyday, simple ways to challenge this binary and make space for nonbinary people?



# *A Conversation with TJ Alexander*

**Q: How did you develop Simone and Ray as characters? Were you inspired by people you know or were they completely imagined?**

**A:** If Ray and Simone were inspired by anyone, it was myself. It truly felt like I was splitting my own personality into two halves and giving them both their own lives. On the surface, I'm a pretty outgoing person and I want to make people laugh, but inside I can be anxious and distrustful, so creating Ray and Simone was an exercise in getting those two halves to talk to each other. I think a lot of people feel similarly about their personalities, and there's often a feeling of disconnect associated with it, but Ray and Simone were my way of coming to terms with the idea that those two aspects of personality are actually complementary. They don't have to fight all the time. They can work together and protect each other. Welcome to my therapy session, y'all!

**Q: Why did you decide to make food a central theme of the novel?**

**A:** Because I'm constantly thinking about food. I'm thinking about what I'm going to have for lunch already, and I just finished breakfast. Food is a basic necessity, but it's the only one that feels fun to me. Also, is there anything more wonderful than feeding the people you care about? It's just a lovely expression of love; it's a great shorthand.

**Q: Galettes! Tropical fruit cheesecake! Chocolate trifles! How did you come up with the recipes and the food in the book?**

**A:** Confession: I am not a gourmet cook. When I cook or bake at home, it's usually really simple stuff. But like most people who watch baking competition shows, I've become a real armchair quarterback. You look at the recipes super-talented and creative people have come up with on TV and you think, "Hm, should have added a crunchy element." Like, who am I? So the recipes in *Chef's Kiss* were born out of a combination of classic family recipes that I've made a thousand times and those moments where I thought with much hubris I could improve a champion baker's cake. Dreaming up food I would make if I had the skills is definitely my favorite pastime.

**Q: Why did you decide on a romance between a nonbinary person and a cisgender person? What about this dynamic is unique and something you were excited to explore on the page?**

**A:** When I started writing *Chef's Kiss*, there were a few (very few) nonbinary side characters in mainstream media, but I had never seen someone like me

in a starring role being loved and in love. That's not a good feeling. So I knew I wanted to write about a nonbinary love interest. I decided to pair them with a cisgender person so that the story would act as a kind of love letter to the cis folks in my life who were there for me when I came out. Some of the most tender moments between Ray and Simone involve conversations very similar to ones I had with friends and family who really wanted to be supportive and were terrified of making mistakes because they love me and don't want to hurt me. I was incredibly lucky to experience that—not just the acceptance (which should be standard issue) but the give-and-take of compassion—and I wanted to show readers how magical that can be.

**Q: What are your hopes for queer, trans, and nonbinary representation? In romance, literature, and beyond!**

**A:** Oh, we plan on stealing everything cis people have and claiming it for ourselves. Ha-ha, just kidding! (Or am I?) But honestly, LGBTQ+ folks have not been allowed to be the heroes in our own stories for far too long. I'm tired of seeing one throwaway line that teases some microscopic hint of queerness. I'm tired of scraps. I want to see our queerness enlarged, in full color, as huge and complicated and beautiful as we are in reality. I want to see every trope, every genre queered to hell and back. We deserve it.

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

**A:** I hope trans/nonbinary folks who need to hear it will read this story and understand that they are loved and loveable. Our experiences are all so vastly different, so a trans or nonbinary reader may not see themselves in Ray, and that's okay. But if this book reminds trans/nonbinary folks in some small way of their immense, gorgeous power, I will consider it a win. For cisgender readers, I hope they see that it's not really about getting pronouns right every time (although that would be nice) or saying the correct thing every time (although, again, that would be nice!); it's about seeing trans and nonbinary people as worthy of love and respect and acting accordingly as best you can. That includes standing up for us however you are able, in small ways and big ones. Also, we're very hot. I hope that gets through to cis folks.

**Q: It was difficult reading about the bigotry and injustice Ray faces in their workplace. Was it difficult writing about it?**

**A:** Uh, yeah. That part really sucked. But I didn't want to ignore the fact that, in a toxic environment, that stuff happens all the time. When Ray comes out, they are saying "I am sharing this piece of myself and I am not ashamed" and ill-intentioned people around them use that tiny point of vulnerability and

twist it around to essentially say, “You should be” just so they can achieve their own goals. And it’s cloaked in all this passive-aggressive pseudo-concern, which is the worst part, because it really is just garden-variety bigotry in a new hat. We’re seeing this play out on a national scale with anti-trans legislation across the country right now in 2022. But as hard as it was to write about, I needed to see the people who care about Ray come to their defense and stand by them. We all need to see that.

**Q: What’s next? Another romance novel? A sequel?**

**A:** Oh, wouldn’t that be fun!? [winky face] Listen, the good people at Atria/Simon & Schuster told me I could keep writing about queer folks kissing, so I will keep writing about queer folks kissing. Everyone say, “Thank you, Atria/Simon & Schuster!” I’m serious about queering every genre and trope. I want to write about queer people kissing in historical fancy clothes and queer people kissing in space and queer people kissing on beaches while the sun sets. Queer people kissing and cracking jokes: that’s what’s next.

