

# THE LOST FAMILY

*A Novel by Jenna Blum*

## READING GROUP GUIDE

Use these questions to guide your book club's discussion of *The Lost Family*.

1. Consider Masha's restaurant. How is running the restaurant important to Peter? In what ways does it help or hinder his attempt to bear his loss and grief and live a fuller life?
2. When Peter and June first meet at Masha's, what draws them to each other? Despite their very different personal experiences, what do they have in common?
3. Consider the various relationships different characters have with food. What's revealed by what and how each person eats? Which approach seems particularly healthy or not?
4. To "blot out unwelcome thoughts," Peter "took inventory, cataloging what the restaurant had in its storeroom." What are these thoughts? How does this activity help him? To what extent can work or distraction help with emotional difficulty? What are the limits of such an approach?
5. Note the many allusions to art and music throughout the novel. What does each add to the layers of meaning in the story? What's the value of art and music in one's personal life? How, in particular, might it serve in times of grief and suffering? Why did Peter try "not to listen to music at all"?
6. "If Peter's insides had matched his outsides, he would have looked like a Picasso. Like *Guernica*." What does this mean? In what other ways does Peter conceal elements of himself? To what extent is this normal and when might it become unhealthy?
7. Compare and contrast how Peter and June each feel about and present their physical selves, their bodies. In what ways does each change or not as they age? What factors determine how a person feels about his or her body? How is Elsbeth's relationship to her body influenced by her parents?
8. In what ways have Sol and Ruth been good for Peter or not?
9. In what ways do the memories of Masha and Vivian and Ginger influence Peter, for better or worse? Is his adamant decision to never speak of them helpful or hurtful? What are the best ways to heal from such profound grief and loss?
10. When June had finally seen Peter's scars, "the braille of [his] humiliation and helplessness," he thinks that "happiness...had made him careless." What does he mean? What is "the blessing of scars"?
11. After talking to June of his scars and the suffering that caused them, Peter's "heartened" that "she had handled it well." What is it in her response that is so effective and helpful? How is it that she could understand some of his profound experience? What's important in any response to another's suffering or grief?

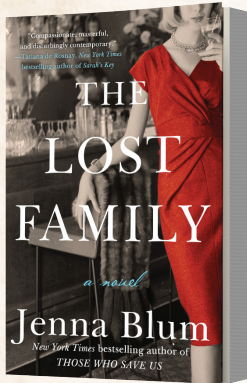
12. Peter becomes concerned that his growing love for June “had punctured the sealed chamber into which [he] had put Masha and the girls.” What is he afraid of? To what extent should these two loves be kept separate or not?
13. Sitting in Carl Schurz Park, Peter experiences the “calming effects of being near water.” His daughter Elsbeth also “loved the water.” What is it for each of them that is so valuable about water? Where else in the novel does water seem significant?
14. Peter realizes that “his worst, most damning trait...that defined him, the secret at his core... was his inability to act, his paralysis in crucial situations.” Where has this demonstrated itself in his life? What might explain this behavior?
15. What is the “magnitude of discrepancy” June experiences with Peter as their relationship progresses? Consider her various responses to frustrations and unhappiness, from rearranging the furniture to being unfaithful. What does each reveal about what she wants and needs?
16. June believes herself to lack “natural maternal instinct” for Elsbeth and to simply “want other things.” What does she desire in her life? Is this incompatible with having a child?
17. Regarding food—its preparation, presentation, flavor, etc.—Peter’s “passion *consumed* him.” Why is this? What might this reveal about his profound emotional experiences and burdens?
18. What kinds of difficulties does Elsbeth struggle with as she becomes a teenager? What particular emotional difficulties does she have with her mother? What is attractive to her about Julian? For what various reasons might she be so drawn to being photographed by him?
19. Are Julian’s photographs justified as art? How does such subject matter connect to the theme of the body—in injury and health, shame and pride, ugliness and beauty— throughout the novel? To what extent is the body personal or public? Where do these lines blur?
20. How is it that Peter is eventually able to open emotionally to Elsbeth, to begin to share the story of his deep love and loss of Masha and the girls? What are the risks of such sharing? How does it work to heal?



To request a book club Skype call-in with Jenna, visit [JENNABLUM.COM/CONTACT](http://JENNABLUM.COM/CONTACT)

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Author photograph © Madeline Houpt



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## *The Food Behind* THE LOST FAMILY

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*The Lost Family* is a novel about a German-Jewish Auschwitz survivor named Peter Rashkin, who emigrates to New York, starts a restaurant, and falls in love—only to find his new American family haunted by the wife and daughters he lost during the war. Really, Peter is like Ferdinand the bull, except instead of wanting to smell the flowers, all he wants to do is cook. He was training as a chef in Berlin when the Nazis came to power; in America, being in his kitchen at Masha’s, his 1965 Manhattan restaurant named after his lost wife, is his happy place.

The menus in *The Lost Family* are a fusion of 1965-era favorites and German-Jewish comfort food, Peter and Masha’s favorite childhood dishes: Masha’s “Little Clouds” (cream puffs with chocolate fondue), Brisket Wellington, Chicken Kiev, and my favorite, Masha Torte—an inside-out German chocolate cake with cherries flambé. There’s also a Hamburger Walter, invented for news anchor Walter Cronkite when dining at Masha’s, served au Poivre with No Vegetables At All (my dad was a news writer for CBS and he told me this was how Walter liked his hamburgers).

I love food, and I had a joyous time creating and kitchen-testing all the recipes for Masha’s menus in *The Lost Family* (there are two, spring and fall). I relied on my German friend Christiane’s mother’s recipes, my childhood memories of my Jewish grandmother’s dishes, the *Mad Men* Cookbook and similar cookbooks from the 1960s, and ingredients from my garden. I worked in food service for many years as a waitress and a prep chef to subsidize my expensive writing habit, but I’m not a chef, so there were some notable cataclysms, for instance throwing ice cubes into the oven to create crispy baguettes for Peter’s crostini (explosions) and dropping an entire Masha Torte on the floor (flaming explosion; we ate it anyway, and it was good!).



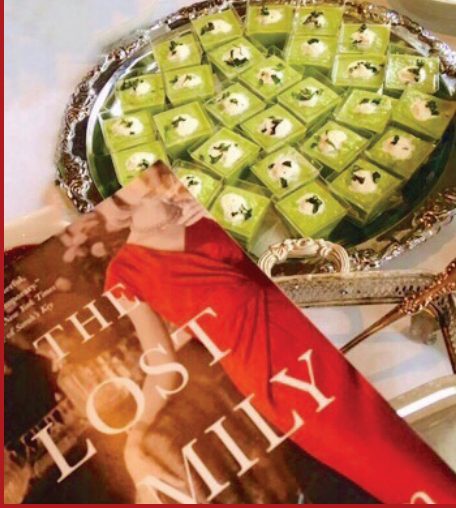
Author photograph © Madeline Houpt

Yet part of me has always wanted to be a restaurateur. When I was a child I had a restaurant in my basement called Faster in which I held my parents hostage. For *The Lost Family* my fiancé and black lab were my taste testers, but they were much more willing than my parents and gladly ate all the recipes. The lusciousness of food, its importance as art form, comfort and sustenance, runs throughout the novel like the marbling of fat in a good steak. I hope you enjoy it, and the story of the Fabulous Rashkins, as Peter calls himself and his daughter when he’s teaching her to cook, as well.

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# Spring Pea Soup

Compliments of Masha's and its proprietor/chef Peter Rashkin



## ingredients

- 8 slices of bacon
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 2 celery ribs, thinly sliced
- 3 shallots, thinly sliced
- 1 leek, white and tender green parts only, thinly sliced
- A dash balsamic vinegar
- 5 cups chicken stock
- 2 fresh rosemary sprigs
- Salt and freshly ground white pepper
- ½ pound sugar snap peas, thinly sliced
- 2 10-ounce boxes frozen baby peas
- 4 stems flat-leaf parsley
- 1 cup creme fraiche
- 1 garlic clove, puréed

## preparations

1. In a non-reactive soup pot, cook bacon over moderate heat until browned, about 5 minutes. Reserve to plate; pour off fat.
2. In the same pot, heat olive oil & add celery, shallots, leek & dash balsamic vinegar.
3. Cook over low heat until translucent, about 6 minutes.
4. Add chicken stock, 6 slices of the cooked bacon, 1 rosemary sprig and a pinch each of salt and white pepper. Simmer until the vegetables are very tender, about 15 minutes.
5. Discard the bacon and rosemary. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the vegetables to a blender or food processor.
6. Bring separate saucepan of salted water to boil. Cook sugar snap peas 3 minutes. Add frozen peas and 3 stems parsley (reserve one stem for garnish). Cook 1 minute. Drain.
7. Add peas to vegetables in blender; add ¼ cup broth & purée until smooth.
8. Transfer the soup and the remaining broth to a large bowl set in a larger bowl of ice water to cool. Chill in refrigerator one hour.
9. Blend puréed garlic & creme fraiche in medium mixing bowl, by hand with whisk. Strip remaining rosemary off its stem and chop very fine along with one reserved stem of parsley.
10. Ladle chilled soup into bowls & top with garlic creme fraiche. Top with sprinkling of rosemary and parsley. If desired, add reserved 2 strips of bacon, crumbled very fine.

Soup and garlic creme fraiche can be made—separately—a day in advance and kept in refrigerator. **Bon appétit!**

# Masha Torte

(Dark German Chocolate Torte  
with Cherries Flambé)



## ingredients

- 1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 3/4 cup organic brown sugar
- 1/4 cup cocoa powder  
(the darker the better)
- 1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
- 3/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon sea salt
- 1/3 cup fat-free Greek yogurt  
(I prefer Fage)
- 1 tablespoon agave syrup (optional)
- 1 tablespoon maple syrup (optional)
- 1/4 cup unsweetened vanilla  
soy milk (can also use coconut or  
almond milk)
- 1/4 cup coconut oil
- 1 1/2 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 1 medium zucchini, grated  
(about 1 cup)
- 1 cup dark chocolate chips or  
shaved baking chocolate

## preparations

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.  
Oil 12-inch cake pan.
2. In large bowl, whisk flour, sugar, cocoa powder, baking powder, baking soda, salt. Using wooden spoon, create well in center of dry ingredients; add yogurt, milk, coconut oil, syrups (if using), vanilla.
3. Mix batter until just combined; stir in zucchini. Add chocolate chips/ baking chocolate.
4. Pour into pan & bake 40 – 50 minutes or until toothpick inserted in center comes out clean. Cool on rack 5 – 10 minutes; transfer to fire-proof serving platter.
5. In large sauté pan over medium high heat, combine butter & sugar; cook until sugar dissolves. Add cherries & syrup, Grand Marnier. Bring to simmer. Remove from heat.
6. Pour atop torte. With long kitchen match or long-handled lighter, ignite cherries. Once flames have burned down, serve.

### For flambé:

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar
- 15 ounces of cherries (Bing or dark)  
in syrup (can be canned)
- 6 tablespoons Grand Marnier

**Bon appétit!**