

• Book Club Kit •

The Chicken Sisters

a novel

All's fair in love,
war, and the kitchen

KJ DELL'ANTONIA

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Discussion Questions

1. Though they have been historically divisive in Merinac, how do the rival chicken shacks work to bring the Pogociello and Moore families together in the present of the novel?
2. Discuss the different paths Amanda and Mae take after their childhoods in Merinac. How did their upbringing dictate their adulthood choices to stay in the town or to leave?
3. What role does the reality TV show *Food Wars* play into the two families' dynamics? Discuss the disconnect between what viewers see on the show compared with what goes on behind the scenes. Do you think this theme of appearance versus actuality applies to reality television as a whole?
4. Consider the various connotations the word "chicken" has in the book. How do the different characters "play chicken" with one another?
5. Do Mae and Amanda find their current situations fulfilling? In what ways are they both stuck in their personal and professional lives? How do they break out of those patterns?
6. How do Amanda's various family members react when they find out they've been picked for *Food Wars*? How do you think you would respond?
7. What role does food play in the characters' lives? How did the descriptions and sensory details about food affect your reading experience? Did you know much about the traditions of the Midwest before reading *The Chicken Sisters*?
8. How does the small-town setting of Merinac make a story like this possible? Do you think it could take place in a large city? Discuss how small-town life plays into the heart and spirit of *The Chicken Sisters*.
9. What do you think is in store for both Amanda and Mae?



A Conversation with KJ Dell'Antonia

Female relationships are at the heart of the book. Tell us a little bit about these two sisters, Amanda and Mae. At first glance, their lives couldn't appear more different, yet both are inextricably tied to their shared past.

Amanda and Mae made different choices for the same reasons. They both wanted to get away from their past and build something more secure—but neither of them ever learned how to build security for themselves, so they rely too much on others to tell them who and what they are.

The characters in this book are dealing with some serious issues—of loss, abandonment, and deep feelings of insecurity—yet you take a lighthearted, witty tone. Why approach these weighty topics with humor?

I can't imagine facing them without humor. Even when things get really dark, light creeps through if you let it—life is always just going on around us, and that can be hard, but it can also be welcome, and it can often be very funny. I think humor makes hard times better. Not easier, necessarily, but better.

You've written extensively about parenting and family relationships as a regular contributor to the *New York Times* and at other publications. How did that background inform the family relationships you've created in this book?

I've always been interested in the choices people make about what they think will make them happy, and how those choices play out. We tend, as people, to make decisions around family and relationships that make absolutely no sense from the outside, but seem, to us, like the only thing we can do based on our background, and our values, and societal pressures. I've spent a lot of time exploring those choices as a journalist, so I think it's natural that in my fiction, things would get complicated. Life is complicated.

Your viral *New York Times* essay “Why I Didn’t Answer Your Email” takes a look at the trials and tribulations of parenthood and connection in our current digital era. Why do you feel people connected with this topic so much? How do the themes in this essay show up in *The Chicken Sisters*?

I think we have all struggled to find a balance between our digital and physical lives. We are so available now—but we can't engage with everything, it's not possible. Yet we've all been on both sides of that. We are the person who isn't answering, and the person who isn't getting an answer, and just putting some words to all the other things that are happening in our lives and why they win, most days, really resonated.


Social media makes a big impact in the book—from its role in *Food Wars* to Mae's career to the connection it maintains for people in the town. Why did you think it was important to include it so consistently throughout?

Social media is so integral to our lives—and even more so during the time we have spent on lockdown—and it's wonderful, but kind of chaotically so. I wanted to show people trying to find a genuine way to be connected to their social media worlds, and to use them for support—and of course promotion—while also focusing on the real things in front of them, because I think many of us are balancing that constantly.

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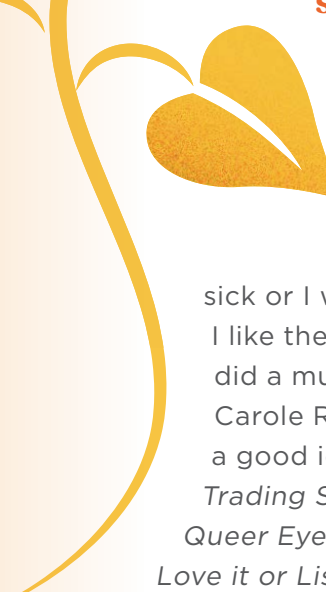


The town of Merinac, Kansas, where everybody knows everybody else's business, seems to come to life on the page. What influences did you draw on to create this setting?



I love small towns (and big cities, but that's a different story). The real Chicken Annie's and Chicken Mary's are in Pittsburgh and Frontenac, Kansas, where my parents grew up—in fact, Amanda's house is my grandmother's house—but I was also thinking of the small New England town where I live now, and other small towns I know well—even including one where we've stayed a few times in a very rural, non-tourist part of France. When I was younger, I tended to think of small towns, and especially Midwestern small towns, as places you leave. Now I understand that they're places you come back to, and I wanted Merinac to have that quality. (It's also an anagram. #cheesy)

The subtle manipulations of the *Food Wars'* producer to create drama for her show seem very believable. Do you have a reality TV show you love to watch?



I will watch any reality TV show that pops up in front of me—to the point where I can't turn them on except on airplanes or when I'm sick or I will never write another book. I like the *Real Housewives* (I once did a multiday deep dive on how Carole Radziwill ever thought that was a good idea) and *Shahs of Sunset*. *Trading Spaces*, *What Not to Wear*, *Queer Eye*, *Kids Baking Championship*, *Love it or List It*, *Property Brothers* . . .

I love trying to figure out why people are there, what they think it's going to do for them, and how they hope it's going to turn out. And I would never, ever do it myself—although I once spent many hours filming as a guest at what was supposed to be a surprise birthday party for someone for a reality show about surprise parties that I don't think ever got made.

Where did you get the idea to have a small-town feud between two fried chicken restaurants?


I grew up with Chicken Annie's and Chicken Mary's, and I've never forgotten them. But when I told my mother I was writing a book about two fried chicken restaurants, she was like, do you want to know why there are two? And I covered my ears with my hands and started singing lalala, because no, I did not want the real story. I was making up a story. I still don't know the real story, actually.

Mimi's recipe for fried chicken plays a pivotal role in the *Food Wars* competition. Do you have a favorite fried chicken recipe?

I tend to wing it. The secret is flour, then liquid, then breading, always with some cornstarch in it. Within that you can do almost anything.

What's next for you?

I'm writing another novel. And then another. I hope.





Recipes from KJ's Kitchen

Super Simple Sweet Vinegar Salad Dressing

1 tsp salt

Fresh ground pepper

¼ cup white vinegar (you can use apple cider vinegar
but don't use fancy vinegar)

2 tbsp neutral oil (grapeseed, canola)

2 tbsp sugar

Combine in jar and shake. Dresses one head of iceberg lettuce (which is the only kind you should use here) a little too generously, so leave a little in the jar.

The inspiration for this simple Chicken Mimi's salad came from Babe's Chicken Dinner House in Frisco, Texas, where my oldest son has celebrated his birthday by doing the chicken dance with a chicken hat on his head many times.

Frank's Family Fried Chicken

Serves 6

2½ cups flour
1 tbsp + 1 tsp salt
1 tbsp + 1 tsp garlic powder
1 cup Frank's Hot Sauce
4 eggs
⅓ cup cornstarch
2 tbsp smoked jalapeño powder
2 tbsp chili powder
1 tbsp ground mace (can substitute nutmeg)
Ground pepper
2 quarts peanut or other oil (for stovetop frying) or 1 gallon peanut or other oil (for deep frying) or as directed in your fryer
3 lbs skinless boneless chicken thighs, cut into smaller pieces (generally half)

Arrange three plates or low dishes in a row for breading. (I use plates for the flour mixtures because they fit so much better in the dishwasher.)

Mix 1 cup flour, salt, and garlic powder, and put on first plate.

Mix Frank's Hot Sauce and eggs in low dish.

Mix 1½ cups flour, cornstarch, jalapeño powder, chili powder, ground mace, and ground pepper on last plate. (Feel free to play with the spices—as long as you spice generously and don't skip the cornstarch, it should work out great.)

Heat oil to 325 degrees in deep fryer or heat 1 inch oil to 325 degrees in Dutch oven or large cast-iron frying pan.

Bread each piece of chicken by dredging first in flour/salt mixture, then in hot sauce mixture, then in flour/cornstarch mixture. Set on cooling rack until ready to fry.

When oil is hot enough, fry chicken in batches for 13 minutes or until chicken reaches 165 degrees at thickest point. Don't crowd it. If frying on stovetop, turn over at about 6 minutes. Put chicken in 200-degree oven to keep warm if necessary. (In our family we just eat it in between batches.)

FAFAQs

(Frequently Asked Frying Questions)

Isn't this going to be messy? Yes, but it's worth it.

Man, that's a lot of oil. Yes, but if it's hot enough, the chicken absorbs very little. You'll see when you strain it and store it after cooking that you still have most of it left for frying again. You can reuse the oil until it gets yucky. Also, that's not a question.

What do you do with the oil when it's yucky? Personally, I pour it out in the woods.

Stovetop or deep fryer? We have a deep fryer—the Breville Smart Fryer—because I grew up making donuts, and we still like making donuts. And French fries, and fried chicken. But sometimes we just use a big cast-iron pan (any big pan will work). It depends whether I feel like cleaning the stove, or the fryer.

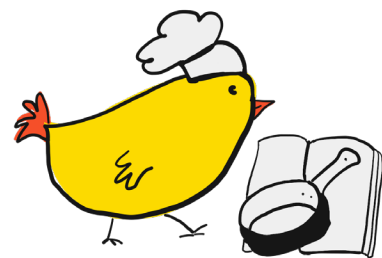


Illustration by KJ Dell'Antonia



Mae's Magic Chocolate Cream Pie

For the filling

⅓ cup cornstarch
⅓ cup sugar
⅛ tsp salt
3 cups whole milk
1 oz unsweetened chocolate, chopped
5 oz semisweet chocolate, chopped
(or chips, but chopped melts better)
1 tsp vanilla extract

For the crust

1½ cups graham cracker crumbs
6 tbsp butter, softened

For topping

Whipped cream (Who are we kidding, we buy a can. Barbara would use Cool Whip in a pinch.)

My recipe for Chocolate Cream Pie is the least complicated possible, and entirely adapted from Smitten Kitchen's best chocolate pudding recipe, but with a little more oomph, because it needs to stay firm when you slice it—and it does.

First, make the crust:

Mush the graham cracker crumbs and butter together in a bowl (or just the pie pan).

Press it out into a crust, using a spoon to get it up the rim, pop it in the fridge while you make the filling.

Filling:

Combine the cornstarch, sugar, and salt in a medium saucepan. Break up any cornstarch lumps.

Slowly whisk in the milk in a thin stream so that lumps don't form, over medium-low heat.

Cook, whisking frequently and scraping the bottom and sides so no lumps form, for 10 minutes or so. It shouldn't simmer; just cook and thicken until it will coat the back of a spoon. (It's super obvious; don't look at your spoon and ask yourself, Is this coated? Because you will know.)

Add the chocolate, and whisk slowly (by which I mean you're not whipping this, you're just preventing lumps and making sure everything is melted) for 2 to 4 minutes, until chocolate is fully incorporated and mixture is as thick as hot pudding.

Remove from heat, stir in the vanilla, then pour into crust and refrigerate until set, at least 2 hours.

Top each slice with whipped cream and serve.