

The Chef's Secret

Reading Group Guide

1. Why did Bartolomeo Scappi first begin to keep a journal? In his last entry, he writes: "All I have done in the last sixty-nine years, I did for two things" (page 14). What are those two things? Why does he keep his journals hidden, and how does he feel about the journals as he approaches the end of his life?
2. How do Scappi and his love, "Stella," first meet? Why did they have to keep their romance a secret? What obstacles did they face in keeping their relationship under wraps? What would have been the consequences if they had been found out? What does their romance reveal about social class and marriage during this time period?
3. Explore the motif of secrets. Who in the novel keeps secrets and from whom are these secrets kept? Are any of the secrets ever revealed? If so, what are the implications or outcomes?
4. Many of the characters in the novel have a vendetta against someone else or against another family. Why do they have these vendettas? What is a vendetta and why were they so common at this time? What might these vendettas reveal about the corresponding themes of honor and justice?
5. Who suggests that Bartolomeo Scappi should write a cookbook? Were you surprised by this? How is Scappi acquainted with this person and what was their relationship like before this suggestion was made? Did the suggestion change your view of their relationship? Explain.
6. Consider the theme of legacy. Which of the characters in the novel are concerned with legacy and how do they undertake to secure their own legacy? What do they hope to leave behind and what challenges do they face? Are they ultimately successful in securing their legacy?

7. Why is Scappi often limited in his daily work? Whose teachings does the author say became a threat to the ostentatious way of living of many Catholics of the time? How did these teachings ultimately affect the work obligations for chefs like Bartolomeo and Giovanni?

8. How do the characters respond to the comet they see following Scappi's death? What significance do they believe it has? Why do you think they were so struck by it? At the end of the book, the author writes that this sighting was based on a real sixteenth-century event. What discovery does the author reveal that this historical sighting helped to make possible?

9. Why does Gio attempt to hide from Isabetta the journal containing his father's copy of the poem that he found pasted to the statue Pasquino? What happens as a result? What connection is there between Isabetta's family and Gio's family and how does Isabetta discover this? How does her family react to this discovery?

10. What do Val and Gio learn when they visit the Libro d'Oro in Venice and what impact does it have on their relationship? Who is "Stella" and how do they respond to the news of her identity? Were you surprised by this revelation? Why or why not?

11. Who was responsible for the death of Giacomo Crispo? Was justice served for his murder? What implications does this have for Giovanni later in the story? How does this contribute to a dialogue about the theme of justice? Does the book suggest whether there is inherently justice in the world? Was there a system of justice within society at the time reflected in the book? Discuss.

12. At first, Giovanni is shocked by the revelations about his father. How does Giovanni come to a better understanding of his father and his father's choices after the events in Venice? How are the two men alike? What does Gio ultimately decide to do with his father's recipes and why? Do you agree with his decision? Why or why not?