

"Sweet and funny, magical and mysterious."  
—Lori Nelson Spielman, New York Times bestselling author of *The Life List*

# the Memory Gardener

a novel

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of *ALL THE SUMMER GIRLS*



## READING GROUP GUIDE



# INTRODUCTION

Lucy Barnes has an uncanny ability to know exactly which scent among the flowers she grows will return a person to a long-forgotten memory, a key from their past that has the potential to change their future. When she takes a position as the gardener at a somber, colorless assisted-living home, the evocatively scented flowers that she grows awaken not only the home's gardens, but the entire community, stirring new pleasures and unearthing long-buried secrets within all who venture through the gardens' gates.

But when a secret comes to light that threatens to shatter the newly close-knit community, the future suddenly looks uncertain.

Have the memories that Lucy has unearthed awakened something wonderful...or are some memories better left buried?



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Lucy and her mother each have a magical gift that is an amplification of an actual phenomenon. In real life, there is a scientific connection between scent and memory; odors travel more directly than other types of sensory information to the parts of our brain that generate emotions and store memories. In *The Memory Gardener*, the author plays with this idea by giving Lucy the magical ability to grow flowers whose scents allow people to literally relive moments from their past. Similarly, the author plays with the idea that art inspires a wide range of emotions, giving Lucy's mother the magical ability to create paintings that make viewers feel an emotion so deeply that they are, in a sense, spellbound. You might say that scents that trigger memories and art that evokes emotions are examples of "everyday magic." Can you think of other types of everyday magic? For example, would you consider being transported by a good story a type of everyday magic? Or the way that being by the sea inspires a sense of calm?
- 2.** Those who breathe in the fragrance of Lucy's flowers don't get to choose the memory to which they return, but if you could—if you could relive anything from your past—what would that moment be and why?
- 3.** Louis remembers that he once loved to take photographs, and Cynthia taps into the community leader that she had been in her youth. Is there anything that you might like to reclaim from your past self? Can you recall a character trait, an old hobby, or a goal that has faded over time...something that you might like to reawaken?



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

4. In Chapter Twenty-Three, Adam explains that the French writer Marcel Proust wrote that “the taste and scent of a certain cookie—a madeleine—dipped into tea, brought him right back in time to visiting his grandmother as a child. She’d served him madeleines, and when he smelled them again, he was swept back through his life, back to his childhood, for a moment.” Is there a certain scent that is tied to a specific time, place, or person for you?
5. In Chapter Fourteen, Vikram says that he always found it “absolutely maddening that the moments in time that stick with me, haunting me, are the bad ones, the traumatic ones, the ones where I behaved poorly...or someone else did.” Do you agree that bad memories seem to cling longer, remaining more vivid in your mind than good memories? If so, why do you think that is?
6. In Chapter One, Lucy reflects on the moment when she realized that gardens make her “heart sing in mysterious ways.” Is there a place that makes your heart sing in mysterious ways? The woods? A bakery? A bookstore? Why do you think that is? What memories and emotions do these places stir for you?
7. In Chapter Six, Lucy reflects that “Every garden paints a portrait of the person who designed it.” Do you agree? If you have a garden, how do you think your garden reflects or represents you?
8. In Chapter Six, Lucy also explains that she believes that “caring for plants is symbiotic; as you tend to them, helping them thrive, they soothe the broken parts within you, too.” Do you agree? Do you believe that the act of caring for someone or something can be mutually beneficial?



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 9.** There are five gardens in the novel: the sunken garden, the woodland garden, the rose garden, the cottage garden, and the California garden. Which of these gardens would you most like to visit and why?
  
- 10.** Lucy's favorite flower is the rose. Do you have a favorite flower? What are some adjectives that you would use to describe its appearance and scent? Do you have any specific memories or associations that are tied to your favorite flower?
  
- 11.** In her acknowledgments, the author writes that she was inspired to write this novel in part by the research and writings of Dr. Oliver Sacks, a neurologist who asserted that gardens have "restorative and healing powers" for elderly patients and patients with neurological diseases. What are some mental and physical aspects of gardening that you think could be beneficial to someone as they age?
  
- 12.** In Chapter Twenty-Nine, Lucy's father says that her mother believed her real magic lay not in her gift itself, but in the way that she could use her gift to help others. If you could have any magical power that you could use to help others, what would it be?

# CHAI CUPCAKES WITH CHAI BUTTERCREAM

Recipe courtesy of Kara's Cupcakes Inc.

For a book primarily set in gardens, there is quite a bit of baking that happens in the pages of *The Memory Gardener*. Remember the “famous” chai spice cake created by Vikram, the retired Michelin-starred chef who lives at the Oceanview Home? I am delighted to share that the talented team at Kara's Cupcakes, a wonderful bakery with several locations in the Bay Area, has developed the following chai cupcake recipe inspired by Vikram's cake! I hope that as you bake these cupcakes, the enchanting scents of cardamom, clove, nutmeg, and vanilla dance around you, just as Vikram remembers from a very meaningful night in his past.

Happy baking...and happy reading!

—Meg Donohue, author of *The Memory Gardener*



## Chai Spice Mix

- 3 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1 ¼ tsp ground cardamom
- 1 ¼ tsp ground ginger
- ½ tsp ground allspice
- ¼ tsp ground cloves
- ½ tsp ground nutmeg

Mix all spices together in a small bowl. Store extra in an airtight container.

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## Cupcake Ingredients

- 1 chai tea bag
- ¼ cup chai tea (brewed and cooled)
- 3 ½ cups (390g) cake flour, spooned and leveled
- 4 tsp chai spice mix (from above)
- 2 ¾ tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp baking soda
- ¼ tsp salt
- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened to room temperature
- 1 ¼ cups sugar
- 4 large eggs, room temperature
- 1 ¼ cups buttermilk, room temperature
- 1 ¼ tsp vanilla extract



## Cupcake Instructions

1. **Brew the chai tea:** Bring 1 cup of water to a boil. Pour over the chai tea bag and steep for 10–15 minutes. Cool completely. You'll use  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of this tea for the batter. (Tip: You can make this a day ahead and refrigerate it—just bring it back to room temperature before using.)
2. **Preheat the oven to 325°F (162°C).** Line two cupcake pans with 24 liners.
3. **Combine dry ingredients:** In a medium bowl, whisk together flour, chai spice mix, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Set aside.
4. **Combine wet ingredients:** In a separate bowl, whisk together buttermilk, cooled chai tea, and vanilla extract.
5. **Cream butter and sugar:** In a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, beat the butter and sugar on high until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes. Scrape down the sides of the bowl.
6. **Add eggs:** Beat in the eggs one at a time, mixing well after each addition. Scrape down the bowl as needed.
7. **Combine:** On low speed, add the dry ingredients to the butter mixture and mix just until combined. Slowly pour in the buttermilk-chai mixture and mix until the batter is smooth. Do not overmix.
8. **Fill and bake:** Divide the batter evenly among cupcake liners, filling each about two-thirds full. Bake for 20–22 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Cool completely before frosting.



# Chai Buttercream

## Ingredients

- 1 ½ cups (3 sticks or 12 oz) unsalted butter, softened
- 3 ½ cups (435g) powdered sugar, sifted
- 2–2 ¼ tsp chai spice mix (from above)
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

## Instructions

1. In a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, beat butter on high speed until smooth and creamy.
2. Add powdered sugar, chai spice mix, vanilla, and salt. Beat on low for 30 seconds, then increase to high speed and beat for 2 minutes, until light and fluffy.
3. Frost cooled cupcakes generously.
4. Optional: Sprinkle lightly with chai spice mix or top with a small cinnamon stick for garnish.

