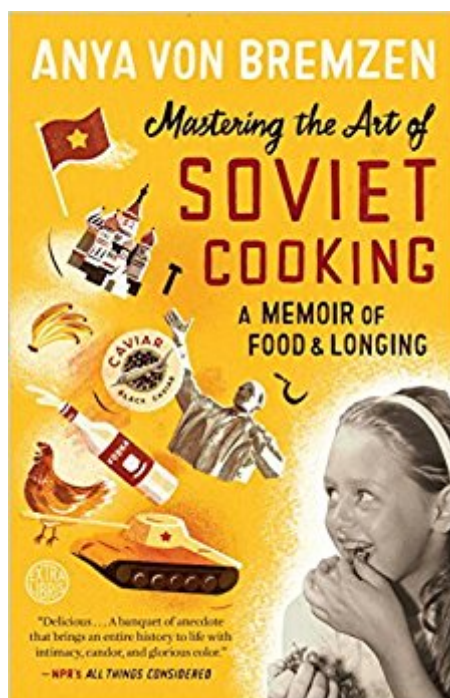


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Mastering The Art Of Soviet Cooking: A Memoir Of Food And Longing



Synopsis

A James Beard Award-winning writer captures life under the Red socialist banner in this wildly inventive, tragicomic memoir of feasts, famines, and three generations. Born in 1963, in an era of bread shortages, Anya grew up in a communal Moscow apartment where eighteen families shared one kitchen. She sang odes to Lenin, black-marketeered Juicy Fruit gum at school, watched her father brew moonshine, and, like most Soviet citizens, longed for a taste of the mythical West. It was a life by turns absurd, naively joyous, and melancholy—and ultimately intolerable to her anti-Soviet mother, Larisa. When Anya was ten, she and Larisa fled the political repression of Brezhnev-era Russia, arriving in Philadelphia with no winter coats and no right of return. Now Anya occupies two parallel food universes: one where she writes about four-star restaurants, the other where a taste of humble kolbasa transports her back to her scarlet-blazed socialist past. To bring that past to life, Anya and her mother decide to eat and cook their way through every decade of the Soviet experience. Through these meals, and through the tales of three generations of her family, Anya tells the intimate yet epic story of life in the USSR. Wildly inventive and slyly witty, *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* is that rare book that stirs our souls and our senses.

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Q&A with Anya Von Bremzen Q. One of your reasons for writing this book was your feeling of

leading a double life as a food writer. Can you explain? A. When I started my career in the early 90s, after emigrating in the 70s, the Soviet drama of putting food on the table was still fresh. Whenever I ate at a fancy restaurant for my work, I felt pangs of guilt about all my family struggling back in Moscow. Over time Russia became a wealthy country, but I continued to be haunted by a sense that behind everything I ate professionally lay another reality: a shadow of our collective Soviet trauma. Something deeper, more existential, and related to food. This haunting, complicated past, bottled inside of me, finally had to come out. Q. What surprised you most, writing the book? A. What I've come to call the "poisoned madeleine" factor. We lived in a state where every edible morsel was politicized and ideologized. And most of our food was produced by the state my mother had reviled and fled. And yet we experience a powerful bittersweet nostalgia for those "poisoned" flavors. The complexity and contradiction of this longing is what I explore in the book. Over pages eating becomes almost a metaphor for ingesting ideology and for resisting it. Q. Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking tells your story, but also the story of three generations of your family. How did you research their experiences? A. My mother has an almost uncanny recall of her emotional life, starting from her earliest childhood back when she was an alienated sensitive kid in the totalitarian frenzies under Stalin. Her feeling of being a "dissident-born," always at odds with Soviet society, has been an incredibly powerful trope for this book. My dad, on the other hand, remembers perfectly all the small physical details: what vodka cost in 1959, for example. And my grandparents were great raconteurs. Even after they were long gone their stories lived on. Q. You describe, to sumptuous effect, Russian literature's obsession with food. Who are your favorite Russian authors? A. I love most the satirical strain in Russian literature. As much as I venerate Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, it's Nikolai Gogol, that gluttonous hypochondriac, who's my guy. Gogol is amazing! on food. His Dead Souls essentially chronicles one grifter's journey from dinner to dinner through the vast Russian countryside. Q. You've spent time in the new Moscow over the last few years. How would you describe contemporary Russian food culture? A. The last chapter of the book is ironically titled "Putin on the Ritz." That pretty much sums it up. Foie gras and burrata, sushi flown in from Tokyo—it's all there for comrades with serious rubles. And yet, at the same time, there's this astonishing wave of Soviet nostalgia! Even oligarchs are pining for the mayonnaise-laden salads and kotleti (Russian burgers) of our shared, vanished socialist childhoods. Q. How did the work of cooking change over time for Russian women? A. That's an arc I lay out in the book. The pioneering Bolsheviks of the 1920s wanted to

liberate women from domestic chores—and so both my grandmothers were lousy cooks! But the Bolshevik feminist project failed, and by the next decade, under Stalin, Soviet women got stuck where they remained—carrying the infamous “double-burden” of a job and housework. Still. In a society with so much cultural control, some women of my mother’s early 60s generation found personal self-expression in cooking. Now with the avalanche of chichi prepared food at Russian supermarkets, cooking is strictly a matter of choice. Q. What was the first dish you remember learning? A. When I was a kid of five, Mom and I lived on one ruble a day—poverty even by Soviet standards. When we completely ran out money Mom would make fried eggs over stale black bread cubes. I watched her make it so many times I could do it blindfolded. And it’s still one of my favorite dishes. Q. What is your favorite dish to cook with your mother? A. Each chapter of the book has us obsessing about something different—a new “project.” The sumptuous kulebiaka from the pages of our beloved Chekhov drove us crazy but turned out incredibly. And both Mom and I love the spicy exotic flavors from the ethnic rainbow of former Soviet ethnic republics. Chanakhi, a Georgian lamb stew with tons of herbs (Stalin’s favorite dish incidentally) is something we cook a lot. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Most Westerners imagine Stalinist Russia as a food desert: politics dictating taste, failed agricultural policies yielding shortages and famines, muddled distribution systems spawning interminable queues, and black markets supplying forbidden goods. Although this view has plenty of truth, it lacks nuance and humanity, as von Bremzen reveals so eloquently in this memoir. Arriving at age 10 in Philadelphia with her mother and a couple of suitcases, she found herself in a new culinary world that she ultimately embraced. Nevertheless, she pined for some of the great prerevolutionary Russian dishes, such as kulebiaka, the famous salmon pie that so defines classic Russian cooking. Von Bremzen, disdaining czarist Russia as much as the Soviet Union, shows the personal side of Soviet life, recounting the terror of war and secret police as well as the power of human resilience. Thanks to some recipes, American home cooks may summon up for themselves the tastes and smells the author evokes. --Mark Knoblauch --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

This book is a treasure-I cannot even put it into words-it is first and foremost a personal memoir of what basic eating and survival looked like in the USSR, but it weaves in so much history and how the political changes molded the country’s food culture as well. If you have seen stock photos of Soviet Union food ration lines, and wanted more of the story, pick it up. Through the lens of food,

you get a history lesson that school text books do not offer. Von Bremzen's raw honesty, sometimes embarrassingly so, is endearing; although she is highly critical of the many leadership mishaps and horrors committed by the leaders of the USSR, she seems to genuinely miss at least parts of it in all its former glory. It is hard for me to understand, as I cannot separate out the good from the bad, but the way she shares her story, you can see how she could have such a nuanced point of view. This was her home. Her childhood. Her mother is the heroine of the book-sensible and strong, the life she led, the sacrifices she made, it's heartbreaking yet still a story of redemptive love and perseverance. And you will never look at your stocked pantry and grocery shelves the same.

Give yourself a little time to "get into" this book. It starts slowly, but gradually becomes a can't-put-it-down memoir. There is just enough food in the book to give it a focal point, but really in the larger sense this story is about a mother and daughter navigating the latter end of the 20th century as newcomers to America, and what you bring from your home country that matters, and what does not. Food as part of a culture does matter, and it serves as a way to bind this family together, even across thousands of miles.

I had a hard time reading this at first and almost gave up which is something I rarely do. I was not expecting a short history of Russia and food since 1900. It was drudgery. However, when I realized that somehow I completely missed Russian history during my school years I decided that it wouldn't hurt to learn a bit and changed my attitude. There are many very interesting family members. Some, not so nice, and others delightful--especially Anya's mother. And I loved that some of the food that Ms. Von Bremzen thought was strictly Russian was based on food from the U.S. How Russia got those food ideas during the time of Stalin was fascinating. This is not an easy book to read, but once I was able to "tune" my brain to it I found it remarkable.

In this loving and poignant memoir, von Bremzen uses food as a lens to focus in on and explore late Russian Imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet history. And what a story it is. Being Russian-American myself I was seduced by the charm of this book. My own parents defected in the same period that von-Bremzen and her mother left and I grew up on much of the same food because I grew up near the Russian-Ukrainian enclave of Brighton Beach in NYC. So this particular book was like a fun house mirror - not quite the same as my own experiences, but close enough to act as a madeleine. And I can truly say that this book speaks from authentic experiences that will fill you with joy even if you are not Russian or Russian-American. It's an extremely well-written history. The book is divided

into decades chronicling roughly 100 years of Russian and Imperial Soviet history. In each decade we explore von-Bremzen's family - from her great grandparents to herself and also in each decade we have a particular food experience. If you are looking for recipes, then you will get them - at the back of the book with extra information about the author's experiences with the food. If you are looking for history, you will get it. It's much more personal history and that makes it much more rewarding to read. After reading this you will understand more about the centrality of food to the Russian experience. Now I really want to go and make some Salat Olivier (Russian potato salad) and Kotleti (bunless hamburgers!).

I don't usually read cookbooks, as I seldom, if ever, cook from recipes. I do, however, read quite a few books about food, as I am far more interested in the cultural context of recipes than in step-by-step "how-to's." Anya Von Bremzen has created quite a fine memoir of recipes, interwoven with family stories, all the while comparing/contrasting food mores of the U.S. with those of the former Soviet Union, from whence she emigrated as an adolescent. Tales of the morbidly fascinating Soviet state are presented with equal measure of humor and grim realism; this book is only a small part cookbook, but a large part page-turner storytelling. A fine work in both form and content.

This is a must-read for anyone with any interest in the culture and society of the unlamentably defunct Soviet Union. The book traverses a century of political upheaval, wars, depression, state-sponsored propaganda and chicanery all around the unifying metaphor of food --- and sometime lack of it. Although there are tantalizing recipes that also reflect an amazing ability to improvise in the absence of ingredients Westerners generally take for granted. This is not a typical cook book. Instead, it provides telling and occasionally chilling, frightening insights into a perverse and twisted political entity that placed little, if any, value on its citizens. Although nowhere near as deep as David Remnick's memorable Lenin's Tomb, the reader nevertheless gains great insight into the rigors and challenges of living from day to day in the USSR. The book is spiced with considerable wit that will make you laugh out loud while also scratching your head in bewilderment, and at the same time will move you to compassion and sympathy for what these people endured for almost 100 years. The writing style is crisp and moves along at a smart pace without ever getting bogged down in pedantry. A delight from start to finish!

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