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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. With startling beauty and sardonic wit, Anya von Bremzen tells an intimate yet epic story of life in that vanished empire known as the USSR - a place where every edible morsel was packed with emotional and political meaning. Born in 1963, in an era of bread shortages, Anya grew up in a communal Moscow apartment where 18 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, drab, naively joyous, melancholy - and ultimately intolerable to her anti-Soviet mother, Larisa. When Anya was 10, 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, in its full flavor, both bitter and sweet, Anya and Larisa, embark on a journey unlike any other: they decide to eat and cook their way through every decade of the Soviet experience - turning Larisa's kitchen into a "time machine and an incubator of memories". Together, mother and daughter re-create meals both modest and sumptuous, featuring a decadent fish pie from the pages of Chekhov, chanakhi (Stalin's favorite Georgian stew), blini, and more. Through these meals, Anya tells the gripping story of three Soviet generations - masterfully capturing the strange mix of idealism, cynicism, longing, and terror that defined Soviet life. The stories unfold against the vast panorama of Soviet history: Lenin's bloody grain requisitioning, World War II hunger and survival, Stalin's table manners, Khrushchev's kitchen debates, Gorbachev's disastrous anti-alcohol policies. And, ultimately, the collapse of the USSR. And all of it is bound together by Anya's passionate nostalgia, sly humor, and piercing observations. *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* is that rare book that stirs our souls and our senses.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Anya von Bremzen wrote the best Russian cookbook I've ever encountered. Her "Please to the Table" is loaded with easy to follow recipes, literary references and information about Russian history and Russian life. She's taken that one step further with this memoir. The result is a book that's informative and fun to read. Von Bremzen grew up during the coldest days of the Cold War, when the Cuban Missile Crisis had us in a nuclear p-ing contest with Nikita Krushchev, Russia's 'five year plans' were hopelessly mired in incompetence, the communist dream degenerated into a morass of black market dealings and Animal Farm corruption. Home for the author was a damp and crumbling Soviet-era apartment building, shoddily built and smelling of mold and wet cement, with a communal kitchen where she and her mother cooked up whatever was available at the state-run shops...which wasn't much. In that environment, Von Bremzen develops a love of food and a love of the process. Anya's mother, Larisa, is a gifted cook and does her best to transform the gray and lifeless soviet-era basics. Her real gift for cooking is displayed only on those rare occasions when she makes a lucky score at the shops or the black market and rounds up the necessary ingredients for a traditional dish. These occasional feasts stand out like icebergs in the drab daily fare. Like all Russians, she knows how to shop the black market, how to finagle and finesse. But it's a hard way to live, and the shortages and second-rate lifestyle weigh heavily on mother and daughter. Daily life was a slog. Buying a pair of shoes was a week's worth of effort. Grocery shopping could be almost Kafka-esque in its labyrinthian complexity and frustration.

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