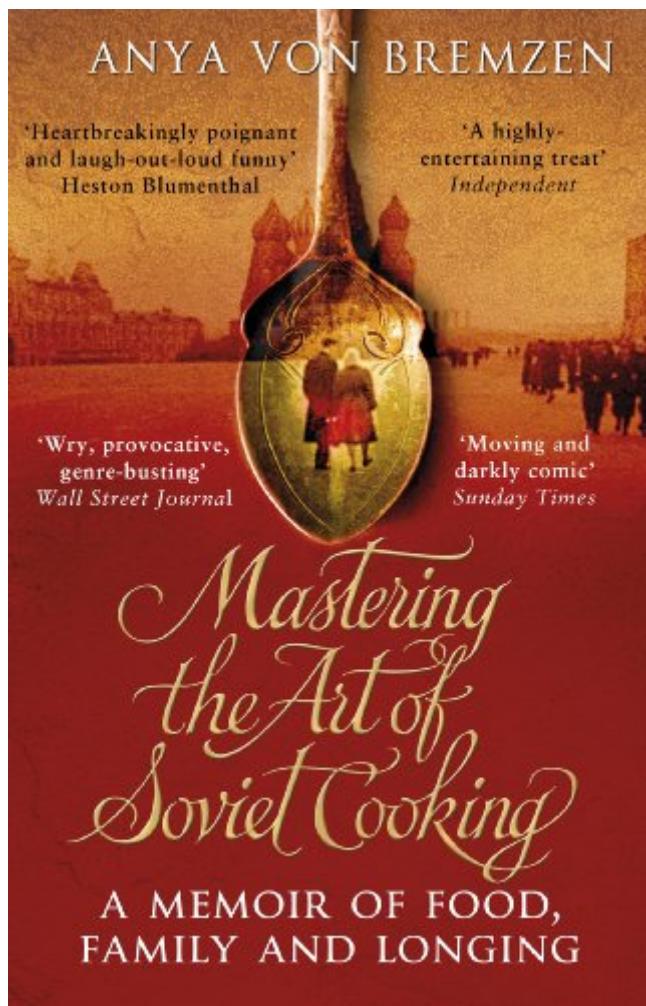


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Mastering The Art Of Soviet Cooking



Synopsis

Born in a surreal Moscow communal apartment where eighteen families shared one kitchen, Anya von Bremzen grew up singing odes to Lenin, black-marketeering Juicy Fruit gum at school, and longing for a taste of the mythical West. It was a life by turns absurd, drab, naively joyous, melancholy and, finally, intolerable. In 1974, when Anya was ten, she and her mother fled to the USA, with no winter coats and no right of return. These days, Anya is the doyenne of high-end food writing. And yet, the flavour of Soviet kolbasa, like Proust's madeleine, transports her back to that vanished Atlantis known as the USSR .In this sweeping, tragicomic memoir, Anya recreates seven decades of the Soviet experience through cooking and food, and reconstructs a moving family history spanning three generations. Her narrative is embedded in a larger historical epic: Lenin's bloody grain requisitioning, World War II starvation, Stalin's table manners, Khrushchev's kitchen debates, Gorbachev's disastrous anti-alcohol policies and the ultimate collapse of the USSR. And all of this is bound together by Anya's sardonic wit, passionate nostalgia and piercing observations. Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking is a book that stirs the soul as well as the senses.

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Customer Reviews

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 heartbreakingly 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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