



Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking: A Memoir of Food and Longing

By Anya Von Bremzen

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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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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

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

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 70's, 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—delicious!—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 60's 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.

From [Booklist](#)

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

Review

A Publishers Weekly Best Nonfiction Book of 2013

A Christian Science Monitor Best Nonfiction Book of 2013

"The culinary memoir has lately evolved into a genre of its own, what is now known as a 'foodoir.' But Anya von Bremzen is a better writer than most of the genre's practitioners, as this delectable book, which tells the story of postrevolutionary Russia through the prism of one family's meals, amply demonstrates...Von Bremzen moves artfully between historical longshots (minefields being cleared 'by sending troops attacking across them') and intimate details, like her schoolgirl mother's lunch ration of podushechka, a candy the size of a fingernail...The descriptions of meals are delightful."

—**New York Times Book Review**

"Von Bremzen ladles out a rich, zesty history of family life in the USSR conveyed through food and meals."

—**Entertainment Weekly**

"*Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* turns a bittersweet eye and an intelligent heart on Soviet history through food...Beautifully told."

—**Los Angeles Times**

"Von Bremzen knows how to tell a story – poignant, funny, but never lacking."

—**Chicago Tribune**

"Brilliant...a lyrical memoir and multifaceted reflection on Soviet (and American) cultures."

—**Philadelphia Inquirer**

"An ambitious food memoir that is also a meticulously researched history of the Soviet Union...a meditation on culinary nostalgia."

—**Julia Moskin, New York Times**

"Anya von Bremzen's saga of growing up in a superpower always on the verge of starvation is both rollicking and heartrending."

—**Time**

"A delicious narrative of memory and cuisine in 20th-century Soviet Union. In *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking*, [von Bremzen] follows in the footsteps of Nigel Slater's *Toast* and Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential*: memoirs about life, love and food that linger long after the last page is turned. Her tale is a nostalgia-laden compendium of madeleine moments...A banquet of anecdote that brings an entire history to life with intimacy, candor and glorious color."

—**Ellah Allfrey, NPR's All Things Considered**

"*Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* is a painstakingly researched and beautifully written cultural history but also the best kind of memoir: one with a self-aware narrator who has mastered the art of not taking herself entirely seriously...A breathtaking balancing act...Von Bremzen is as much a virtuoso in her writing as her mother is in her cooking."

—**Masha Gessen, New York Review of Books**

"One-of-a-kind...A nostalgically anti-nostalgic tribute to 20th-century life and food in the land once known as the Soviet Union...Breathtaking feats of raconteurial skill...*Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* is not only

a magic tablecloth, it's a magic carpet that revisits the roads and lanes of the former Soyuz, surveying the tales of hardship and hardwon joys of von Bremzen's relatives and the Russian people."

—**Liesl Schillinger**, *The Daily Beast*

"Russian treasures! You never know when they're going to pop up. My heart gladdened at the sight of Anya Von Bremzen's book. This is history at a personal level, the kitchen table."

—**Martin Cruz Smith**, *The Wall Street Journal*

"Splendid...[Von Bremzen] describes the U.S.S.R. with the eyes of a betrayed lover—alternately despairing, dismayed, aghast and yet, somehow...with love."

—**Russ Parsons**, *Los Angeles Times*

"At once harrowing and funny as hell, an epic history told through *kotleti* (Soviet hamburgers) and contraband Coca-Cola."

—**James Oseland**, *Saveur*

"There is no book quite like *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking*...Through all of this lovely and moving memoir's good humor, bittersweet reminiscences, and gorgeous evocations of food, there hangs the 'toska,' the Russian nostalgic 'ache,' of Anya and Larisa's conflicted feelings about the past."

—**Christian Science Monitor**

"[T]his is no simple food memoir. Von Bremzen situates every dish she mentions in its historical, cultural and literary context, simultaneously delving into her own fascinating family history. Her book is an education through the senses, written with humor, affection and a no-nonsense view of her often baffling native land."

—**The Oregonian**

"A masterful telling of Soviet history through the eyes of a cook... a collection of fantastic stories that you hear only when sitting on a bar stool or in a church pew. Von Bremzen offers remarkable — and personal — insight about the Cold War, its politics, military strategy and the human suffering that accompanied it."

—**Minnapolis Star-Tribune**

"[Von Bremzen] is a profoundly gifted writer, able to lace information with observation, observation with wit...[This book] feels rather like a novel, richly populated and filled with deft dialogue, yet it's also crammed full of history. Imagine Robert Caro crossed with a Chekhov play, if it were funny."

—**LA Weekly**

"Moving...funny...fascinating...Soul-stirring for any emigrant to read, *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* is a beautifully written tale of heartbreak and ultimately happiness."

—**Epicurious**

"Splendid...Von Bremzen is a gifted storyteller who writes with an easy elegance. In *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking*, she achieves a perfect balance between her narrative's varied ingredients. The result: a feast for readers."

—**Book Page**

"Wry, provocative, genre-busting."

—**Wall Street Journal (Europe edition)**

"Through a kaleidoscopic mix of family life, politics, history, and jokes, Von Bremzen evokes in her book a whole Soviet-era world of deprivation and delight."

—*Tablet* **magazine**

"The funniest and truest book I've read about Russia in years. Ms. von Bremzen had the brilliant idea of transporting us back to the Soviet era of her youth by way of its hilarious, soulful, mayonnaise-laden, doctrinally-approved cuisine. This is both an important book and a delight."

—**Ian Frazier**, author of *Great Plains* and *Travels in Siberia*

"I don't think there's ever been a book quite like this; I couldn't put it down. Warm, smart and completely engaging, this food-forward journey through Soviet history could only have been written by someone who was there. Part memoir, part cookbook, part social history, this gripping account of Anya von Bremzen's relationship with the country she fled as a young girl is also an unsentimental, but deeply loving tribute to her mother. Unique and remarkable, this is a book you won't forget."

—**Ruth Reichl**, author of *Tender at the Bone* and *Comfort Me with Apples*

"A delicious, intelligent book. When I read it, I can taste the food but also the melancholy, tragedy, and absurdity that went into every bit of pastry and borscht."

—**Gary Shteyngart**, author of *Super Sad True Love Story*

"I have delighted in Anya von Bremzen's writing for decades. But her prose is at its tangiest, richest, and tastiest in these pages, when she writes about her childhood in the USSR. *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* is as much a history of Soviet life as it is a personal story. Both narratives are provocative and delicious, and both are worth telling your children."

—**Mario Batali**, chef, author, entrepreneur

"Three cheers for Anya Von Bremzen's poignant, vivid, often hilarious book about trying to survive—and have a square meal—in the last decades of the Soviet Union. The author's acute political perceptiveness, mordant wit and notable culinary expertise keep the reader delightfully engaged throughout."

—**Francine du Plessix Gray**, author of *Them: A Memoir of Parents* and *Soviet Women*

"Anya's description of the saltiness in vobla is as poignant and image-filled as her reflection on a life that started out one way, but ended up in a better place by chance and fate. Her experience of growing up a child of two different worlds tells the beautiful tale of so many American immigrants."

—**Marcus Samuelsson**, chef-founder, Red Rooster Harlem, and author of *Yes, Chef*

"This is much more than a memoir or an extended meditation on food and longing: this is history at its best, accessed through the kitchen door. Written with verve and seasoned with perfect doses of that irony that communist societies excel at cultivating, this book is a rare and delightful treat, as much of a page-turner as the best of novels and as enlightening an introduction to Soviet history as one could ever hope to find. Anya Von Bremzen proves with admirable flair that the adage "you are what you eat" applies not only to individuals and families, but also to entire nations, and that cookbooks may indeed be the most translucent of windows to the soul."

—**Carlos Eire**, author of *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy*

"*Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* is a monumental but deeply human book that reads like a great Russian novel, filled with dark humor and nostalgia. It opens up an entire universe, teaching us about the many deep meanings of food: cultural, political, social, historical, personal."

—**Ferran Adrià**, chef-proprietor, El Bulli

"A fascinating, colorful and at times oddly tender look at the history of the former Soviet Union as seen through Anya von Bremzen's intimate recollections of food--including foods never eaten or never to be sampled again. Von Bremzen does a soulful job of capturing Russians' 'complicated and even tortured relationship with food.' What emerges is her own complicated yet loving relationship to the culture she and her mother willingly left behind, but could never quite abandon."

—**Lucette Lagnado**, author of *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: One Family's Exodus from Old Cairo to New York*

"Anya von Bremzen describes the foods of her past powerfully, poetically, and with a wicked sense of humor. Anyone can make a fancy layer cake sound delicious. To invoke an entire culture and era through an intimate story about a salad or soup--that's taking food writing to a whole different level."

—**David Chang**, chef-founder, Momofuku

"Here's a surprise: a wry account of how the Soviet Union *tasted*. Larisa Frumkina, the mother of the author, the daughter of a top military intelligence officer (endlessly, brilliantly resourceful, she appears to come straight out of Russian literature), becomes an émigré, a Pathmark shopper, and a co-conspirator with her daughter in Soviet food nostalgia and self-discovery. A wink, a laugh, a transgression, a sweet sad life over the generations that throws an epic history into a new light."

—**Stephen Kotkin**, professor of history, Princeton University; author of *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*

"One of the most unexpectedly pleasurable reads this year. Beyond the innately voyeuristic thrill of reading about the details of Soviet life, *Mastering* is funny, intimate, evocative and rueful."

—**Kirkus Reviews**

"Celebrated food writer Von Bremzen pulls back the curtain on Soviet life in this sweeping, multigenerational memoir."

—**Publishers Weekly**

"Most Westerners imagine Stalinist Russia as a food desert...Although this view has plenty of truth, it lacks nuance and humanity, as von Bremzen reveals so eloquently in this memoir...[Von Bremzen] shows the personal side of Soviet life, recounting the terror of war and secret police as well as the power of human resilience."

—**Booklist**

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Lamont Williams:

Book is to be different for every single grade. Book for children right up until adult are different content. As we know that book is very important normally. The book *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking: A Memoir of Food and Longing* ended up being making you to know about other knowledge and of course you can take

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