

Laura and Peter Zeranski

Female Speaker:

From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Agnieszka Pukniel:

This is Agnieszka Pukniel at the Library of Congress. Saturday, August 30th will mark the 14th year that booklovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The first of all which is free and open to the public will hold evening hours for the first time ever this year in its new location, the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C. Hours will be from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. For more details, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest.

And now, it is my pleasure to introduce Laura and Peter Zeranski, whose book "Polish Classic Desserts" is a true fount of knowledge for lovers of traditional Polish sweets. Thank you so much for joining us.

Peter Zeranski:

Oh, we're happy to be with you today.

Laura Zeranski:

Good afternoon.

Agnieszka Pukniel:

Laura, you learned how to cook and bake Polish goods mostly from your mother-in-law. How difficult was it learn those recipes from another world, and of course, to learn all those strange names?

Laura Zeranski:

It was a little difficult. My mother in law handed over to me many of the holiday treats, such as the ginger cake and some of the Easter mazurkas and things like that. So I got a lot of practice, and the names still are difficult for me to pronounce at sometimes, but I'm getting better at them. And after 40 years, I think I've been doing a pretty good job of all of it.

Agnieszka Pukniel:

In Poland there is a saying, [speaks Polish]. This means that "where there are six cooks, there no food." You together have been cooking for almost 40 years, and obviously you found yet another recipe; this time for being able to work in the kitchen together. So how is it, cooking, and baking as a husband-wife duo?

Peter Zeranski:

Well, we have our roles pretty well designed. I do most of the dishes. And there's a few things that I do. I'm mostly the taste tester, because I grew up with the food, you know, at my mother's kitchen, and I'm mostly the taster, but I do like to do the crepes. And we have a wonderful recipe for a walnut torte, which is probably my all-time favorite. I like to get the vodka bottle and put it into the icing, but only Laura's not looking.

Laura Zeranski:

No, we do a pretty good job of sharing the load. And as Peter said, he's the taster. I test things out, he comes and tastes, and then we put it together -- but both of us put it together then. And we've done a marvelous job, I think, with all the desserts we've come up with.

Peter Zeranski:

Well, we're still married. So that may be the test.

Laura Zeranski:

That's true.

Agnieszka Pukniel:

I guess you did find that true recipe for working in the kitchen together. So what is your favorite recipe? I'm pretty sure that each one of you has one that is your favorite recipe from the book. You mentioned the walnut torte. But can you tell me, did you follow your mother, for Peter, and your mother-in-law for Laura, recipes directly? Or did you add a little bit of personal touches?

Laura Zeranski:

Well, we did a little of both. We followed her recipes, but from her recipes we've made notes over the years, both hers and my own. And so those notes have come in -- have culminated in this book. We've made some really good changes.

Peter Zeranski:

One thing that I might add to that is that the changes that we have made updated the recipes for modern kitchens. We've taken away the pinch of this and pinch of that, and they've been extensively tested so that new bakers can succeed.

Agnieszka Pukniel:

What is your favorite recipe for each one of you from the book, and how did you tweak them a little bit?

Laura Zeranski:

My favorite recipe is the poppy seed torte. And the -- It is a wonderful mixture of vanilla and poppy seeds that are soaked overnight, and then the batter is just, you know, it's just light and airy. And the filling is a raspberry jelly or jam in the middle. And then you have the whipped cream topping, and it's just marvelous. And I have tweaked it a little bit to make the icing stand up to temperature and not go flat on you so quickly, so it doesn't have to be refrigerated for long periods of time. It can actually sit out, which makes it easier for us to take to events.

Peter Zeranski:

Speaking for myself, it's much more difficult because, you know, as I said, I've grown up with these foods for over 40 years. But I do like a cherry tart that we have in our book, which is just a delicious, fresh, bright, takes advantage of cherries, has a little crunch, and I -- is just one of my favorites. I will say that we have a couple of very good desserts in our first book, which was "Polish Classic Recipes," and the

walnut torte that I talked about is actually in that book, which is my all-time favorite.

Agnieszka Pukniel:

Now, I know from my personal experience baking and cooking in America that I had a hard time to find specific products. It took me forever to find out sour cherries that would resemble the cherries that we have in Poland, [speaks Polish]. And also some of the types of flour that were not -- it was -- they were hard to get in here. Also converting all those measurements, temperatures, the different products that we had in Poland versus the products we have in America. So how difficult was it for you to tweak those Polish recipes into all the American standards?

Laura Zeranski:

Well, the measurements were fairly easy to convert. It took a little testing, but most of the measurements convert pretty easily. The ingredients we did only include recipes only include recipes in the book where people could find the ingredients readily in their supermarkets, or in a more upscale supermarket or deli, like some of the Russian-Polish delis that are around in the area that have these ingredients in their stock. We also try to make sure that the recipes would work with any kind of flour. I've even tested several of them for gluten free, so that people could have that variety in their diet as well.

Peter Zeranski:

I'll give you an example with the sweet pierogi, which is one of the recipes in the dessert book. The most important part of that recipe is the dough. So it's not too thin, so that, you know, all the good stuff in the middle falls out, or that it's not too thick so it becomes very heavy and chewy. Well, that dough was tested extensively using modern American ingredients. You know, flours that can be, you know, purchased at any mainstream grocery store. And of course by the time we got done testing that recipe, the whole kitchen was full of flour, including the cooks.

Agnieszka Pukniel:

Well Peter, you had some big shoes to fill since your mother, obviously, was the author of "The Art of Polish Cooking," published in 1968, which I remember. I own, actually. And this is like a bible to many Polish food lovers. But it seems you did very well since you and your wife -- since your book "Polish Food Classics Desserts" won the Gourmand Award in 2013 for "Best Eastern European Cookbook in the USA." So you had your "Polish Classic Desserts," you had your "Polish Classic Food," and what's next?

Peter Zeranski:

Well, I think what we're doing right now is just traveling a lot to various Polish heritage festivals and making a lot of friends and autographing a lot of books. We have a blog which we put Polish recipes on every couple of weeks. That would be www.polishclassiccooking.com. And you can buy -- anybody can buy autographed copies of our book off that website. But as I say, we put up new recipes every couple of weeks. There's three beautiful summer salads that we just put up recently.

Agnieszka Pukniel:

I found it today. I actually read some of the recipes and was like, "Hm." Well, we've been hearing from Laura and Peter Zeranski, who will appear on Saturday, August 30th in the Culinary Arts Pavilion in the National Book Festival at the Washington Convention Center. Thank you very much, Laura and Peter.

Laura Zeranski:
Thank you.

Peter Zeranski:
Thank you very much.

Female Speaker:
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