Baking from Poland and Beyond

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DOBRE

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CHRONICLE BOOKS
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DOBRE

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FOR MOLLY. SEVEN YEARS AGO,
YOU DIDN'T FLINCH WHEN I RAN INTO
YOUR BED WHEN A BAT FLEW INTO
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I LOVE YOU FOREVER.

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I fell in love with Polish baking because I didn't like the pickles in the Czech Republic. Hear me out.

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It was 2009, and I'd moved to Prague from Boston a year earlier, twenty-three years old and aimless. I bartended at night and made mistakes at the grocery store during the day. Baking cookies with rye flour instead of wheat. Putting caraway seeds in a curry instead of cumin. The usual things that

happen when you're fumbling around a new language. Eventually I learned, and food shopping became less of a crapshoot. Except for one thing: the pickles.

This was Central Europe—it was supposed to be prime pickle territory, but I couldn't catch so much as a whiff of a good half sour, let alone a kosher dill. Czechs make their pickles sweet. Every jar I took home, whether store-bought or lovingly canned by a coworker's mother, had sugar. This was useless to me—I hate sweet pickles.

I'd almost given up when I went on a date with a nice Moravian guy. He understood the problem, and what was more, he knew where the good pickles were. "So, we put sugar in our pickles," he said. "You don't like it? No problem. The Poles don't." Which was how I wound up on a second date, skidding around snow drifts to cross the border into Poland, the first time anyone in my family had been back in about a hundred years.

We pulled up to a vegetable stand at the first little town on the Polish side and acquired pickles easily (in a bucket, sold by weight, "2 kilos, *proszę*!"). Date #2 seemed to be going well, and I was eager to prolong it. Across the street was the steamed up window of a bakery and pastry shop. It would do. "Should we have a look?" I asked.

Lugging the handle of the enormous plastic pickle bucket together, we sloshed across the street and into the warm, yeasty bakery, and everything hidden behind the foggy window came into view: an almost impossible variety of streusel cakes, Danishes, and jammy yeast buns, many of them uncannily familiar. To one side were trays of tiny tea cookies in every shape and flavor. Against the wall, stacked on racks, were loaves of seeded rye bread, fluffy white rolls, and—what was that? I paused for only a second before I pushed the pickle bucket into my date's arms and stepped up to the counter, squinting. The woman behind it raised an eyebrow.

"Is that challah?" I asked.

"Chałka."

"Yes! Challah!"

"Nie. Chałka."

This lady clearly didn't know what she was talking about. A neat stack of glossy golden braids sat on the shelf right behind her head. Challah. I'd know it anywhere. Despite our obvious misunderstanding, she smiled as though we were on the same page while she wrapped one in paper.

Back on the street, the Czech and I ripped into the still-warm loaf and stuffed long strands of fragrant egg bread into our mouths. That nice man who'd driven me all the way there was looking at me expectantly. This wasn't just challah. This was a very good challah. This was the challah I grew up on. The kind made by the ever-fewer proper Jewish bakeries around Boston. This was the stuff my great-grandparents baked in their one-room flat in a village outside Warsaw to support the family before they emigrated. Was this loaf in my hands the ancestor, offspring, or lost cousin of those baking traditions they brought with them?

I looked from the challah to the pickles and back again. Pieces were falling into place. How was it that we'd traveled little more than an hour and suddenly, in this little bakery in this little Polish town, I felt more at home than I had in a year? I looked at my date. We smiled at each other. I was falling in love with Polish bakeries. And maybe with the guy who drove me here.

More than sixteen years have gone by since that trip to Poland. In that time, I married the guy, moved to Berlin, trained as a baker in Paris, opened my own bakery, wrote a cookbook, and never stopped returning to Poland. As a professional baker whose bakery focuses on heritage Jewish baking, Polish bakeries and cake shops—*piekarnie* and *cukiernie*, respectively—have become my way of connecting to that culinary heritage in the wild.

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I recall a school assignment—one of those history ones where you look into your family background. I wrote that my maternal family was Polish, but my grandmother stopped me. "We were never Polish," she said. Then, deciding not to go into it much further, she said, "It was Russia back then anyways." It was one of those it'll-make-more-sense-when-you're-older answers. Distancing oneself from Poland was hardly unusual for American Jews of her generation. The terrible antisemitism in the country's history made for a tricky relationship.

It's a loaded thing, identity. Particularly when you get to a country like Poland. A country so fought-over by Germany and Russia for more than six hundred years that at times it has disappeared from the map, only for another war to be fought and the country to reappear, populations altered and repatriated across new borders. Most recently, this border shuffle occurred in 1945—after the world wars, the occupations, the Holocaust—but the culture would continue to be heavily changed both by communism and then by rapid-onset capitalism. This complicated history has deeply influenced and forever changed Poland's populations, physical borders, character, and culture—including its food culture.

Ask a historian what they think the most influential inflection points have been for Polish food, and you'll get moments scattered across centuries. Some credit the Italian queen Bona Sforza with bringing the country its soup vegetables: onions, carrots, and parsnips. Others attribute the return of exiled Polish kings from France. Still others point to the Second World War and the subsequent thirty-seven years of communism as the most transformational period, as it took the sophisticated prewar cuisine and baking culture and changed its ingredients and style through shortages—all the things that weren't available—into something else. And while all of Polish cuisine, baking included, has given and taken from other European traditions—French, Austro-Hungarian, Italian—I'd posit that there is no greater influence on Poland's bakery culture in the present day than the Jewish bakers of its past.

While an exact number isn't known, some speculate that until the Second World War, up to half of Poland's bakers were Jews. There was almost no city or town without at least one Jewish bakery and it wasn't unusual if half or even all the bakeries—as in the city of Kock—were Jewish. This disproportionate representation of a minority that made up a mere ten percent of the population was a result of the historical ghettoization of Jews into limited professions. But all that changed in the war and through the rest of the twentieth century. Even if Jewish bakers basically don't exist in today's Poland, their influence certainly does. The overlap of what is Jewish and what is Polish is so complete that there's no point in trying to disentangle them. Rugelach, onion breads, apple cakes—everyone makes them, so what belongs to whom? Of course, there is no answer to this question. Food is cultural and cultural borders are porous. As one Polish woman I met while researching the book said about the overlap, "We share the same garden. The same earth. Of course, we share the same baking."

I think of another conversation I had with the Italian pastry chef Alessia Di Donato, a resident of Białystok and enthusiastic advocate for the bialy—the long-gone, regional onion-and-poppy seed bun that was a specialty of Jewish bakeries in Białystok before the war and which now exists only abroad, particularly in New Jersey and New York. Traveling often around Poland to teach Jewish baking history, Alessia tells me, "I've asked myself a thousand times why Białystok (and Poland in general) lacks awareness of Jewish cuisine, and the answer in the end is that there are simply no—rather, too few—Jews left. Unlike other minorities still in the Białystok area—Muslim Tartars and Orthodox Ukrainians—who have the opportunity to use the

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kitchen as a place of identity and exchange, Jews cannot. The identity path of the Jewish community in Białystok—and elsewhere—was interrupted after the war, because of the Holocaust, because of the diaspora, and then because of the expulsion of Jews from Poland in 1968. So, I say that it's simply a sad reality."

But to reduce Polish baking to what it has lost would be unfair. Better to say that it is a cuisine that has transformed and transformed again. Stroll through Warsaw today and you'll see how much it's gained, even in the last decade: small bakeries specializing in Georgian khachpuri; tandoor stands making decorated Uzbek breads; and patisseries run by new Ukrainian arrivals.

What's more, contemporary Poland has one of the most robust artisan bakery scenes in Europe, on par with that of Copenhagen and Paris. It's growing fast and building on the strong foundations of the preexisting Polish bakery culture. Traditional and nostalgic recipes are being reinvented. Pastries are evolving, sourdough is booming. Butter is replacing cheap margarine, homemade jams are supplanting the mass-produced, supermarket variety. People are expressing their preference for grains and flours that are both local and sustainable. And while industrial bakeries are probably here to stay, seasonal bilberries, plums, sour cherries, onions, and wild mushrooms, as well as local honey, rye, and farmer's cheese, proudly dominate the repertoires of bakeries throughout Poland—even within the most French-style pastry shop.

The legacy of Polish baking is global: from the New York bagel to pletzalej in Argentina to the French baba au rhum. Populations exiled from Poland transmitted the baking culture to their new homelands, where it's been reinvented time and again. Polish and Polish-Jewish traditions exist in bakeries from Chicago to Brooklyn, Tel Aviv to Melbourne, Bangkok to San Luis Potosí in Mexico. Today, in Paris, you can find an old-fashioned onion board in Sacha Finkelsztajn's on Rue de Rosiers as easily as a fashionable chocolate yeast babka at Mamiche on Rue Chateau d'Eau. You can sit in Melbourne's renowned Bar Liberty, sipping natural wine, and be served a piece of their signature, midcentury Warsaw cake, wuzetka, or cure your hangover in London with soft Brick Lane beigels smothered in mustard and salt beef.

Among these bakeries there is massive variation. Some are holders of tradition, nearly frozen in time, like a language spoken by only a few on a desert island. Others, especially the North American Jewish bakeries, are the natural continuation of a baking tradition that has been adapted in diaspora, absorbing new influences, tastes, and ingredients. There is no one way to look at Polish baking and no one way to define it. Though if you had to, I think the affectionate compliment toward good Polish baking (and pickles) from which this book gets its name will do it: *Dobre, dobre, nie za słodkie. Good, good, not too sweet.*

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This book is not the be-all and end-all of Polish baking. It's one perspective, influenced by my own travels, friends, family, research, and unapologetic affection for Polish baking. The canon is so broad that a definitive book on the subject is another story altogether, but here is my curation. Some tradition, some modernization. The diasporic and the contemporary. The delicious and the more delicious.

A note on using this book: The recipes in this book were tested using weight measurements, though volume measurements are also provided. The best thing you can do for yourself as a home baker, especially with bread and enriched dough recipes, is to get a kitchen scale and weigh everything. Your results will be more consistent and you'll have much less cleanup.

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