

American Culinary Students Get a Taste of Poland

by Jane Morse

LANHAM, Md.—Culinary school students in the Baltimore-Washington area learned that Polish cuisine is a lot more than just pierogi and kielbasa, thanks to a four-day, whirlwind visit by Hanka Sawka, who was sponsored by the Polish American Arts Association of Washington, D.C.

Sawka is the author of "At Hanka's Table," a cookbook plus memoir plus short history of Poland. In it she describes her life in communist Poland with her internationally famous artist husband Jan Sawka, their exile from their homeland, and their difficult life in Paris and then New York City.

The first stop for Hanka and her daughter Hanna, who is a filmmaker and the coauthor of the book, was the Baltimore International College (BIC). There she demonstrated to the students dishes running from the familiar (stuffed eggs) to the rather unusual (beef tongue) to the divinely delicious (meringue torte with coffee butter cream icing—a recipe which alone is worth the price of the book).

All the BIC students and guests were served samples of the dishes



AT HANKA'S TABLE. The preparation of "tongue with horseradish sauce" was definitely on the menu during the special Polish cooking demonstration held at Baltimore International College for the culinary school's student body. Shown above is daughter Hanna Maria Sawka (left) and mother Hanka Sawka (right), explaining in detail the preparation of the delicious Polish delicacy.

which were prepared by fellow students under the tutelage of their instructors. Among the instructors who helped out was master pastry chef and fellow Pole Jan Bandula.

Hanka and Hanna also spoke to students and staff at the Marriott Hospitality Center at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland. There the food samples were graciously provided by Chef Tomasz Duda of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Washington, D.C.

The students at the culinary school of Stratford University in Falls Church, Virginia prepared a sumptuous buffet with nearly 20 dishes based on Hanka's recipes for a Friday night dinner at the school March 31. The results received rave reviews from the more than 50 guests who enjoyed dishes such as sorrel soup,

mushroom strudel, eggplant stuffed with mushrooms, blueberry pierogi, walnut torte and faworki.

The Sawkas' visit had its grand finale April 1 at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland, where Hanka and Hanna addressed nearly 70 guests who tasted the Sawkas' recipes at a lovely buffet prepared by Chef Duda.

It took three years of research and hard work for Hanka and Hanna to produce "At Hanka's Table," which is beautifully illustrated by Jan Sawka. Hanka said she became an expert cook by entertaining — often on a shoestring — her husband's many visitors and business associates. But her devotion to Polish food runs deeper.

"Cuisine is the basis of a culture," Hanka said. "And food is the spirit of the family."

During her talks, Hanka emphasized how Polish food and family gatherings were essential to preserving Polish culture during a time when the communists were trying to destroy the Polish identity.

Hanka condemned the eat-and-run habits of many Americans and noted that many modern kitchens feature stool-and-countertop dining rather than the traditional kitchen table.

"I think the table is a very important symbol," Hanka said. "We forget about this; we don't eat around the table anymore with our family and friends. My message is to come back to this old tradition and be together and share."

The Sawkas' book, which has gotten favorable reviews from The New York Times, Voice of America, and many other media, is available through Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble.

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