

THE BUSY COOK

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WEDNESDAY

History, artistry sit at 'Hanka's Table'

Polish exiles create book, new lives

By Rebecca Rothbaum
Poughkeepsie Journal

As the wife and unofficial manager of a successful artist and designer, Hanka Sawka has played hostess to an ever-growing guest list for more than three decades.

Together, she and her husband, Jan, have entertained countless artists, writers and editors over her homemade meals, many of them from their native Poland.

"Because his business is at home, people come to see him here," she said in a recent interview at their colorful, art-filled home in High Falls, "and I have to cook for everybody."

At her side, he recalled a dinner party she threw at their cramped one-bedroom apartment in New York, where they lived for a time after arriving in the United States.

"We had once 17 people and four courses," he said. "I don't know how she did it."

Now, Hanka has collected 100 of these recipes in "At Hanka's Table," a kind of culinary autobiography, written with her daughter, Hanna Maria Sawka, a filmmaker and stage director, and illustrated by Jan.

The story of Hanka's bleak childhood behind the Iron Curtain, romance with rising star and rebel Jan, their eventual exile and new life in America set off recipes for such delicacies as sorrel soup, potato pierogi and babka.

Sights and tastes

Hanka will be signing copies of "At Hanka's Table" Saturday at a tasting to promote the book at New York Store in High Falls. And from Thursday through Sunday, the next-door Depuy Canal House will be offering a prix-fixe, three-course dinner based on recipes from the book.

Through the years, cooking has been a way for Hanka to stay in touch with a past that could have easily been left behind when she and Jan and their baby came to the United States. The year was 1977 and Poland had kicked out Jan and his new family. Through his poster art, Jan had built a growing reputation throughout Europe, but his activities as a student rebel branded him a dissident. After a brief stay in France, they arrived in New York with \$52, a couple of suitcases and 9-month-old Hanna.

"One of the ways to save all this was to keep



Darryl Bautista photos/Poughkeepsie Journal

Above, Hanka Sawka, center, and her daughter, Hanna Maria Sawka, left, co-wrote "At Hanka's Table." Hanka's husband, Jan Sawka, right, is a renowned artist and responsible for the paintings behind the Sawkas as well as illustrations in the cookbook. **Top**, Hanka Sawka holds a copy of her book.

your tradition around the table," Hanna, now 29, said.

They did not need to worry long for their future: Jan soon made a career for himself drawing for the Op-Ed page of The New York Times, designing sets for the plays of Samuel Beckett and stages for the Grateful Dead. Most recently, his award-winning multimedia project, "The Voyage," has taken them around the world.

These travels and Polish cuisine itself, with its Western European and Asian influences, infuse the book with tastes of other cultures, including French, Chinese, Jewish and Hungarian. There is a special emphasis on brine-pickled foods and soups. Still, Hanka said the recipes ought not be intimidating.

"My recipes are very simple. You can find the ingredients in any grocery store," she said. "The message is: eat well, be together and you can help yourself in this way."

The following recipes are reprinted from "At Hanka's Table" by Hanka Sawka, with Hanna Maria Sawka, published by Lake Isle Press, 2004.

If you go

What — A tasting and book signing for Hanka Sawka's Polish cookbook "At Hanka's Table."
When — Saturday, 2-5 p.m.
Where — The New York Store, Route 213, High Falls.
Information — Call 845-687-7779.

White Borscht

1 medium onion
1 dried mushroom
1 bay leaf
1 pound smoked meat (ham or kielbasa), cubed
4 cups water
2 medium potatoes, scrubbed
Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
1 garlic clove, chopped
1-2 cups liquid from pickled bran, or to taste (see recipe below)
Slurry: 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour, ½ cup cold water, 2 heaping tablespoons sour cream

Put the onion, mushroom, bay leaf, meat and water into a pot and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for 40 minutes. Peel and dice the potatoes. Add salt and pepper to the soup. Add the pota-

toes and garlic and cook over medium heat until the potatoes are soft. Once the potatoes are done, add the pickled bran liquid (the acidity will prevent the potatoes from cooking if added too soon). Make the slurry and add it to the soup (see recipe below). Remove bay leaf. Add salt and pepper. Serves 6.

To make slurry:

Combine the flour with the water. It is important to mix the flour with cold water thoroughly, getting rid of any lumps, before combining it with the sour cream. The water must be cold so that the flour mixes with the water smoothly. Once the mixture is smooth, add the sour cream and mix. Add an equal proportion of hot soup from the pot (½ to ¾ cup) to the slurry and mix well (if the slurry seems to have lumps, add it to the soup through a strainer). This brings the temperature of the slurry to that of the soup, preventing the slurry from turning lumpy once it's added to the pot. Add the now-warm slurry to the pot of cooking soup and stir. Keep the soup at a boil for



at least 1 minute, stirring continuously while the slurry thickens the soup.

Pickled Bran

8 cups water
¼ pound wheat bran
1 small garlic head (about 10 cloves), peeled and sliced
Crust from 1 slice sourdough or pumpernickel bread

Boil the water and cool to lukewarm.

Put the bran, water and sliced garlic into a glass or stoneware container. Add the bread crust.

Cover with cheesecloth or perforated plastic wrap and secure with a rubber band. Set aside in a warm, dark place for 4 to 5 days.

It is ready when it has a pleasant, pungent and acidic smell. You can use the liquid only, or mix in the bran for a thicker soup. If you do not intend to use it immediately, transfer the liquid to a sealed container and refrigerate; it can be stored in the refrigerator for up to three months.

Faworki (Kindling Cookies)

2 pounds vegetable shortening
3 cups all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
6 egg yolks
3½ tablespoons sour cream
2 teaspoons baking powder
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
½ teaspoons salt
1 tablespoon vodka
Confectioners' sugar for sprinkling

In a deep skillet, heat the shortening to 375 degrees.

In a large bowl, thoroughly mix the flour together with the yolks, sour cream, baking powder, vanilla, salt and vodka; the dough must be soft. Divide the dough into two or three portions. On a very lightly floured surface, roll out the dough as thinly as possible. Cut the dough into 1-by-5-inch strips. About one inch from each strip end, cut a slit down the center that ends about 1 inch before the other end. Fold one end of the strip through the slit and gently pull it through.

Deep-fry cookies in the shortening until golden. After frying, place the cookies on paper towels to absorb excess oil; sprinkle generously with confectioners' sugar. Serves 10.