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Author of new cookbook touts 'comfort foods'

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visit her. Eventually, she was evaluated, deemed not insane, released, and given custody of Bob and his brother and sister.

Out of this tense, struggling household, Robert began to hone his cooking senses. His mother worked two jobs, at K-Mart and as a housekeeper, but it was barely enough, so she turned to public assistance.

Bob tried to cook as a way to help mom. "I saw that she was working so hard," he says.

Perhaps out of an innate interest fueled by some pleasant memories of Julia Child, he helped his mom a couple of times by making vichyssoise and Welsh rarebit, two dishes that had Midwestern comfort ingredients, could be done cheaply, but still had a gourmet sensibility.

After he left the armed forces, he lived with his father and cooked for him as a way to try to reconnect. The menu was filled with Midwestern comfort food.

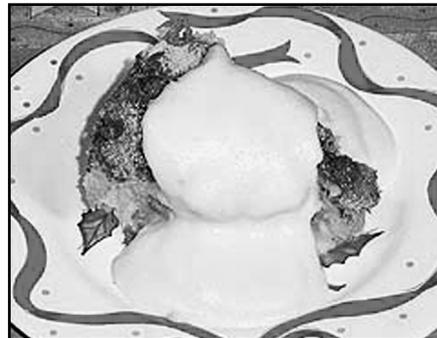
 MORE INFO

'This is Delicious! What is it? An Eclectic Collection of International Comfort Foods'
By Robert Meyers-Lussier
2004

www.bobmeyers.com

Three of his cookbook's recipes were from that time: borscht (because his father liked beets), gingered roast beef (because his father liked mushrooms and beef), and turkey tetrazzini (it contained comfortable noodles and cream).

Meyers-Lussier studied pre-law and waited tables at Pannekoeken Huis, a local Dutch restaurant chain. From his restaurant waiting experience he met many people with whom he could talk about his burgeoning passion of food and cooking. One regular customer asked him one day if he would like to cook a dinner for him and some friends.



Cinnamon-encrusted bread pudding Sabayon is one of Robert Meyers-Lussier's winter desserts.

From this invitation grew a catering business, "The World on a Platter," which lasted four years, until 1996, and helped Bob add many new dishes to his repertoire. Many of the desserts and finger food for his cookbook come out of this period: lemon bars, cheesecake, prosciutto and pear rollups.

Cooking and politics have also been connected in his life. After a sour experience with the Ross Perot campaign in 1992 during his college days, he decided on a whim to run for Democratic state representative from Minnesota against a 16-year Republican veteran, Kathleen Blatz (now a chief justice in Minnesota). He lost, but got a third of the vote.

After his political loss, he worked part-time at Williams-Sonoma in Bloomington, the gourmet kitchen supplies store. Through his previous contact with the station manager of Bloomington Public Television, he came up with the idea of a cooking show called "Talking with Your Mouth Full," a combination cooking show-talk show.

Ironically, his first chat guest was Blatz, his previous political opponent. For reasons even he doesn't know, he fixed a vegetarian torta as his dish, an odd choice one would think for a Republican politician in Minnesota.



Colorful salads are another Meyers-Lussier specialty and frequently include numerous fresh fruits and vegetables.

Some of his political connections also asked him to do dinners or spreads for their political events. One significant one was Dean Barkley, who had run for the House in 1992 with the Reform Party and was eventually appointed to replace U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone, after the Democratic senator's death in a plane crash in October 2002.

Barkley's wife wanted Meyers-Lussier to cook for a Reform Party gathering, where they were going to try to convince Jesse Ventura to run as a candidate for governor. Bob can't swear that it was his dinner that had the right effect on Ventura, but the evening was a smashing success on all fronts, so he'd like to imagine that it did.

There's a pattern here. The author believes food is "the best way of getting people together of different views" to move them in some direction.

FOOD BECAME A CRITICAL PLAYER IN another stage of Robert's life. He had started conducting online chats in the winter of 1995 with gay men, his first contact with the gay world. He was losing a lot of weight and was beginning to feel better about himself physically.

During one online chat, he was invited to a party in Kansas City, and agreed to help with the party. The host was a barbecue beef kind of guy, but he loved pesto, so Bob spent a month experimenting with pesto recipes.

The weekend of July 4, 1996, was when Meyers-Lussier met real live gay people for the first time. And his pesto pasta dish was a hit. (It's in the cookbook, too: spinach-walnut pesto.)

Not long after his closet walls came down at this party, he came out to a female co-worker from his legal firm where he worked part-time, over a meal he had cooked, and soon after she asked him to be her roommate. Within a couple of months, they moved into Minneapolis, Bob's first experience living in a large urban area, and his gay life exploded as quickly as his cooking life had back in 1989. After that, nearly every time he came out was done over a dinner he had cooked.

Only his father was slow to embrace his acknowledgment that he is gay. Meyers-Lussier did not tell him over a dinner. Maybe he knew it wouldn't have made a difference. It wasn't until this year, eight years later, that father and son reconciled.

Recently, I asked the author why his cookbook is not overtly gay. Is there a queer cuisine?

"Good food is good food," he says. "It's beyond gay. If anything, it's the theater of cooking, the process and the entertaining that attracts gay men."

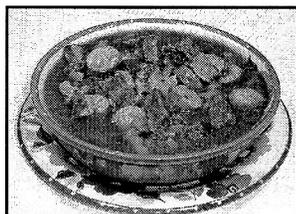
In an era when cooking has become another kind of voyeuristic entertainment, his goals seem attractively old-fashioned, even noble. And he'd like us to be comfortable with that.

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With a background in the Russian language and culture, you'd think I would have more Russian-influenced recipes. I do very much understand the ingredients look rather bizarre, but they work! Russians use cucumbers in many of their dishes, and here it adds a nice texture, in addition to flavor. There is always the next cookbook for more recipes from Russia!

Makes 6 servings
Prep Time: 1 hour

4 cups beef stock
12 ounces dark beer
1 ½ pounds beef stew meat, 1-inch pieces
2 bay leaves
4 tablespoons butter
1 medium onion, chopped
3 medium tomatoes, chopped
2 tablespoons tomato paste
¾ pound kielbasa sausage, sliced ½-inch thick
4 medium cucumbers, peeled, seeded, sliced
10 prunes, pitted, soaked in hot water
12 Kalamata olives, pitted and sliced
2 teaspoons capers
Salt and pepper, to taste
½ cup sour cream



- 1) Bring the beef stock and beer to a boil in a large stock pot.
- 2) Add meat and bay leaves to beef stock mixture. Reduce the heat to a simmer and cook uncovered for 1 ½ hours.
- 3) While the beef cooks, heat the butter in a heavy skillet over medium heat and cook onions until soft. Add the tomatoes, tomato paste and sausage. Simmer for 10 minutes.
- 4) Drain liquids from skillet, then add skillet contents to the meat mixture along with the cucumbers, prunes, olives and capers.
- 5) Cook for 15 more minutes and adjust with salt and pepper. Serve hot with a dollop of sour cream.