

CHICAGO Food



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Rick Tramonto sheds the chef whites and heads home for his latest cookbook, Steak with Friends...

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Going gluten-free
Gluten, a wheat protein, also can be found in soups and even chocolates...

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 2010 | EDITOR: JANET RAUSA FULLER | N

Maria Boicesco's kitchen skills outlasted a war and built her future — and that of her grandson, Rockit's James Gottwald

FROM A COOK TO A CHEF

BY SEANAN FORBES

James Gottwald, the chef at Rockit, 22 W. Hubbard, has a grin warm enough to heat goulash and a finger — the little one on his left hand — with a slight twist. But his inheritance is more than warmth and a bent bone.

Here's lineage in action: A short time into Gottwald's studies at the Culinary Institute of America, one of the teachers hauls in a hindquarter of a cow and asks, "Does anybody want a go at breaking this down?"

Wartime childhood
It is 1941. An 11-year-old girl, Maria, and her mother are in their home in Romania. Maria's father crashes through the window, bleeding from a gunshot wound, shouting that Russian soldiers are coming...

as she can stand, they release her... to nowhere. Her mother is exhausted; Maria, ill. Seeing a stopped train, they request permission to board. They don't know the destination — a concentration camp. Maria's hands and face develop blotches, and illness becomes a lifesaver...

SEE GRANDMA, PAGE 3A



A photo of a teenage Maria Boicesco, who turns 80 on Sunday. Learning how to cook was her ticket to survival during World War II, and to a new life in the United States. Her grandson is Rockit chef James Gottwald.



James Gottwald, in the kitchen at Rockit Bar and Grill, credits his grandmother for his career.

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A GRANDMOTHER'S CULINARY LEGACY

FROM THE COVER | Chef's family history marked by food as nourishment and love

counters soldiers: Germans. She lies. She says she is of pure German descent. The soldiers put her in a labor camp. In this dire place, she discovers the importance of small graces...

A grandmother's lessons
Sixteen years pass. The war ends. The Ziegans plan to leave for the Honduras. Maria hungers for freedom. In her free time, she cooks for another family and hoards her pay...



The slight curve in chef James Gottwald's left pinky finger is echoed in his grandmother's hands.

Later, she and the boys walk to the lake. They carry two empty five-gallon buckets. The children catch small-mouth bass, sunfish, bullhead, catfish and Babchi's favorite, perch...

They're starting to slow down, but she cooks for the field hands, who eat like herds. She dishes out beef stew, huge portions served with the same hospitality she learned in a different era...

Celebrating a life
On Sunday, Babchi turns 80. She lives in Mansfield, Pa. with one of Gottwald's aunts and uncles, who own an organic dairy.



Gottwald (left), his grandmother, Maria Boicesco — "Babchi" — and his son, Nikolas, 7, at Babchi's home in Pennsylvania last year.

"Come to visit," Gottwald says, "and food will be thrust at you. If you're good, then you'll get blueberry wine, as well. I brought her wine that I made for her recipes, including a Michigan sour cherry wine..."



Boicesco cooking at her daughter's restaurant in Millerton, Pa., circa 1985.

Then there's Barbara. A couple of decades ago, Barbara decided to open a bakery. Maria was known for her pies. "She used to bake for my aunt's restaurant," Gottwald recalls.

BABCHI'S GOLUMPKI

MAKES ABOUT 8 PIECES

- FILLING
1/2 medium onion, small dice
3 ounces chopped bacon
2 tablespoons butter
1 large garlic clove, finely minced
1 cup cooked and cooled rice
1 pound ground beef or venison
1/4 teaspoon chopped thyme
1/4 teaspoon chopped parsley
1 tablespoon kosher salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

WRAPPERS

- 1 head green cabbage
2 cups hot chicken stock
1 cup tomato sauce, preferably homemade

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Sweat onion and bacon in butter over low heat until transparent, then add garlic and cook for 5 more minutes.

in a pot of boiling water for 5 minutes, then plunge into ice water. The leaves need to be pliable and should be able to be removed with ease. (Gottwald's mom's microwave method: Heat cored cabbage in microwave for 1 minute, let cool, then peel off the tender leaves...

Nutrition facts per piece: 309 calories, 20 g fat, 8 g saturated fat, 57 mg cholesterol, 18 g carbohydrates, 15 g protein, 1,137 mg sodium, 4 g fiber

GRANDMA'S PIEROGI

MAKES 28 PIEROGI

These freeze very well. Boil them first and store them "with a tad of melted butter."

- DOUGH
2 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon salt
3/4 cup lukewarm water
1 tablespoon sour cream

FILLING

- 1 tablespoon butter
1 Spanish or yellow onion, small dice
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 large baking potatoes
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons cottage cheese

For the dough: Combine all ingredients in a mixing bowl. Mix and knead until dough is smooth (approximately 10 minutes). Refrigerate for 20 minutes.

For the filling: Melt butter in a saute pan over medium-high heat. Add onions and 1/8 teaspoon black pepper. As the moisture evaporates, the pan will pick up a brown color...



Top with caramelized onions or sour cream, or both.

onions, salt, 1/8 teaspoon black pepper and cottage cheese. (Reserve the rest of the caramelized onions to top pierogi.) Cool filling while you roll out the dough. Roll out to approximately 1/8-inch thick and cut into 3-inch circles.

Nutrition facts per piece: 51 calories, 1 g fat, 0 g saturated fat, 1 mg cholesterol, 10 g carbohydrates, 1 g protein, 246 mg sodium, 1 g fiber



"All of my memories revolve around food: the gathering of food, the celebration of food. It's pretty cool. I'm trying to instill this in my son." JAMES GOTTWALD