

interview
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Interview with PhD student Zoya Brumberg on her New Blog, Kimchi and Kishke





AMS PhD Candidate Zoya Brumberg recently started a recipe blog, [Kimchi and Kishke](#). AMS: ATX Blog Editor Holly Genovese interviewed Zoya about her blog's name, favorite foods, and the ways in which everything is an American Studies Project.

HG: First things first, How did you come to the name of your blog? I love it!

ZB: Thank you! I wanted to find a name that would tie Jewish/Russian food to East Asian food in an alliterative sense, because those are the cuisines I am working with. I wanted it to be true to the history and connections of overland trade routes between Russia and East and Central Asia. When reading Darra Goldstein's recent cookbook/food ethnography, *Beyond the North Wind: Russia in Recipes and Lore*, I learned that Russians probably learned lacto fermentation—salting vegetables and letting them ferment from natural yeasts in the air—from trading with China. There is also a type of carrot pickle that Russians call "Korean carrots," which was probably inspired by daikon kimchi. Pickles are important to East Asian, Central European, and Russian/Eastern European cuisines. Kimchi is culturally specific to Korea though, so it locates pickles in a geographic place. I initially wanted to call my blog *Kimchi and Kasha*, because I really like kasha (toasted buckwheat groats) but someone already took that. Kishke is better though, because it is uniquely Ashkenazi (Jewish of Eastern European or German heritage, typically Yiddish-speaking). It's a type of sausage made out of matzo meal crumbs, schmaltz (chicken or duck fat), vegetables, and meat scraps. If you did not grow up with it, you probably haven't heard of it. The word "kishkes" is also used colloquially in Yiddish/Jewish American vernacular to mean guts or insides, which feels kind of perfect. These are the recipes I cook from my gut, so to speak.

HG: How did you decide to start a recipe/food blog? What kinds of cuisines will you be focusing on? And why?

ZB: I love cooking! I started posting pictures of the food I cooked on Instagram, and through that found some really amazing food writers and chefs from the Austin community. I was inspired. I'm not one of those people who always "loved cooking," but cooking and eating—usually surrounding *shabbat* or other Jewish holidays—was one of the few things my family always made time to do together. I developed cooking skills over time, building a lot from the Russian Jewish and Israeli/Middle Eastern foods that I was most familiar with. My grandparents and other family members of that generation were immigrants from Poland, the Soviet Union, Lithuania, etc, but I was born in America and have never even been to Russia. The food that I ate at their houses was one of the only connections I had to their culture, and it was very much a mix of traditional foods like kasha or duck and very American Jewish foods like smoked fish platters and Chinese takeout.

I really amped up my repertoire of recipes and ingredients when I moved to Austin from Chicago and realized that a lot of my favorite foods were not readily available here. I lived in the Argyle St. area of Uptown, the Vietnamese neighborhood of Chicago, and I realized how much I took it for granted that I could get a bowl of bun bo hue (Vietnamese spicy pork soup) or perfect Thai pad see ew noodles whenever I wanted. I have been cooking more adventurously and regularly for a few years now, but I think it was actually the isolation of COVID-19 though that brought me back to Ashkenazi/Russian Jewish foods. I started really thinking about, why do I love Asian cuisines and cooking so much, how do they connect with what is familiar to me, and my family's history?

I guess you could call my food blog cuisines Jewish/Asian fusion, but that feels a bit disingenuous to my experience as a home cook. "Jewish" and "Asian" are both aspecific. Maybe diaspora cuisine is more accurate, if a bit obscure-sounding. It's about making food with what is available, and affordable, what tastes good to me, what I have learned from cooking traditionally whether that tradition is Russian, Szechuan, Indonesian, etc. Diaspora "fusion" cuisine was not invented by celebrity chefs—it's the ingenuity of grandmas, whether

they are making *golubtsi* stuffed cabbage with ketchup or Lao broken fried rice with hot dogs. It's a bit difficult to get typical Ashkenazi Jewish and Russian ingredients in Austin and quite expensive when I can find them—Borderless European Market carries some special imported things, and Central Market and Trader Joe's will have things seasonally—but I started digging into some of the other ingredients that I have become familiar with over the past few years to recreate the tastes I am looking for as well as create new ones.

I'm honestly not sure how to answer the "why" part—I mean, I want to share history and knowledge through food. I want to show that there are ways to share in ethnic cultures and cuisines outside our own backgrounds that aren't appropriative, that explore the multitudes of what it means to cook and eat in America without just playing into the melting pot myth. I want to share recipes that are unique but also homey and familiar. I love when I get a message that my cherry soup reminded someone of their mother's cooking, or that my recipes remind them of how their baba cooked lamb and cumin stuffed pierogi for their dad, tying together a blended Polish/Persian family.

HG: How do you see it fitting in with the kind of culture of food bloggers? Or not fitting?

ZB: I came to my project through Instagram, and I think my approach and understanding of food blogging is shaped by the people I have connected with on that platform. It's a lot of Asian immigrants cooking in the US and finding immigrant community across cultures because there isn't really a strong Malaysian or Filipino or Syrian diaspora in Austin as there would be in, say, Los Angeles. Since COVID-19 started I have been connecting with people outside of Austin too, which has helped me connect with more people of

Russian/Belarusian/Ukrainian/Balkan backgrounds, Jewish or not. My blog fits in as a heritage project; I love reading about other people's family histories and how it connects with food. I try to be really careful about understanding the cuisines I play with instead of just being like, "look at this cool exotic ingredient, learn how to make gochujang jalepeno poppers" or whatever. It is maybe an outlier in that my approach to the history and foodways aspect is more academic. I also do not care about making healthy recipes, or keeping stuff Kosher. It's gluten free because I have an allergy, but I don't present it as a special diet blog.

HG: I know not everything always relates to American Studies, but I do wonder if the blog is connected to your academic or other work in any way? Even if not explicitly, are there intellectual connections there?

ZB: *Kimchi and Kishke* is totally an American Studies project, even if I did not plan it that way. My academic background before graduate school is actually in Russian Studies, and now I am writing my dissertation in large part about Chinese American immigrants in California. It makes a lot of sense that I am looking to food to explore the intersections of immigrant history in America. I am obsessed with how American Jews have this love of Chinese food, which doesn't fit into my current academic research, but it totally something I can research and play with in my blog. It always gives me a way to learn more about global histories and draw from my experience studying Russian history, literature, and culture. Madhur Jaffrey, who is an Indian actress-turned-chef, has this amazing recipe book that looks at curries across the spice trade. So it has Indian recipes but also Japanese, Sri Lankan, British, Singaporean...if it was on the curry spice trail, it is in that book. I took her project as a cue to learn more about the Tea Trail—the 19th century overland trade route between Russia, China, and Mongolia—and other historic foodways. I am also always learning more about Jewish history, which is so global and fluid and cool to learn about.

HG: What is your absolute favorite dish or recipe?

ZB: From my blog? Right now probably Apsara Palace's Cambodian Style Cantonese Noodles (Dry), which is my interpretation of a dish that as far as I can tell only exists in these Rhode Island Cambodian/Chinese fusion restaurants. These were my all time favorite comfort food noodles, from the Cambodian/Chinese restaurant down the street from my parents' house, and I am proud of myself for figuring out how to recreate them just based on recognizing the flavors and ingredients now that I am more comfortable with Chinese and Southeast Asian ingredients. My other favorite would be Bobe's Apple Pie, which is a very homey dish but something that my whole family, in all our disparate locations, make for the Jewish New Year. My great grandmother (just "Bobe" to the whole family) was an amazing cook, just so resourceful at making all the best Polish/Jewish/American food with American ingredients and all the new technologies that came out. My mother had to follow her

grandmother around the kitchen to figure out the recipe! And my version is gluten free, so of course it is not my Bobe's exact apple pie, but it is just so special in being this way that my whole family connects to our legendary family cook.

If I get to pick my favorite dish of all time anywhere, Indonesian Beef Rendang. CNN voted it the tastiest food in the world!

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