

Baking in Harmony

Modernised Balkan cuisine

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Guidance to overcome stress through cooking
Jelena Pop-Kostic



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The image shows two wooden rolling pins resting on a yellow and white marbled surface. The rolling pins are made of light-colored wood and are positioned diagonally across the frame. The background has a mottled, organic pattern of yellow and cream colors.

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Jelena Pop-Kostic and Dr Boban Simonovic

Photographs by Jelena Pop-Kostic

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Why choose this cookbook?

Many recipes in this cookbook have their roots in Balkan cuisine. Balkan food, as it has developed over time, has turned into a beautiful fusion of various culinary traditions. This cuisine is uniquely shaped by the use of local ingredients, historical circumstances, and regional preferences. The people of the Balkans have endured periods under powerful empires and self-invited guests, which has significantly influenced how we eat today. A typical Balkan cake arrangement might feature a sophisticated torte, influenced by Austrian and Hungarian patisserie chefs, alongside a delightfully moist syrupy cake with Oriental origins.

This cookbook is about healthy family food that is cost-effective, made from scratch, not ultra-processed, and occasionally vegan, with some baking extravaganzas. The food I make has evolved throughout my journey and is influenced by Serbian, Icelandic, and British cuisine, along with many other culinary traditions I have discovered and encountered during my life. With a background in biochemistry, I encourage a knowledgeable approach to food and cooking, understanding the science behind cooking and healthy eating.

I have been fortunate to meet people from all over the world and have cooked and baked for them. My food has been tried and tested by people raised in diverse food cultures. They have been excited about my dishes, sometimes surprised or intrigued, but they have always loved them.

My recipes have passed the test of taste buds accustomed to different flavors and textures.

I love and enjoy the baking and cooking process and indulge in the results. With well-instructed and thoughtful guidance, the process will not be stressful. I will help you organize your thoughts and actions while baking. Keep your working area neat, with only the necessary ingredients and tools. Put away what is not needed anymore, avoid clutter, and bake in harmony. Clean up as you go, including dirty dishes, so there is hardly any clearing up to do afterward. You do not want to spend hours cleaning, as this is what you will remember for a long time—a messy kitchen to clear at the end.

Some recipes may appear long and seem complicated, but the instructions are precise, and the whole process is described step-by-step. The ingredients are well-known, widely available, and inexpensive, yet the results are often quite decadent. The scaffolded process described here aims to help you create desserts that are not only beautiful and luxurious but also substantial.

You can use my recipes to nurture yourself and your loved ones. Cooking can make you feel better, proving that you can do something others may have made you think you cannot. It can keep you busy when you need a distraction from painful thoughts. Cooking can be a form of entertainment and a way to show off your skills. Food is a significant part of everyone's identity, and our memories are often triggered by food, taking us back to places in our sometimes forgotten past.

Love,
Jelena

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Vegan Bread with Pesto, page 217

Why stress and baking?

You may find it unusual to read about stress in a cookery book. The idea to include stress and baking stems from the notion that we live in a complex world, with constant changes and disruptions, and stress can have a powerful impact on our life by affecting work performance, mood, relationships, and health. Thus, stress management is very important in breaking the hold that stress has on our life. There are many techniques suggested for stress management, from engaging in mindfulness meditation to using simple behaviour-altering cognitive exercises. Here we suggest that baking could be one of the techniques that will help you manage stress, have some fun and eat delicious food.

The build-up of stressors

We all experience stressful situations in life, such as financial worries, bereavement, serious illness, relationship breakdown, job loss, or caring for children or sick relatives. We all had to learn to cope with such challenging situations. Even a pleasant development in our lives such as getting a promotion, buying a new house, taking on new responsibilities, or moving between cities (or countries) can still take a mental and physical toll on us. When we encounter numerous little or big stresses in a short time period, we may lose our ability to cope well. This will, of course, vary from individual to individual.

Stress epidemic

According to the Mental Health Foundation (YouGov in 2018), which piloted a poll on how people cope with stress, 74% of 4,619 people in the UK reported they have been overwhelmed or unable to cope with stress. Furthermore, 49% of young adults (18–24-year-olds) reported that they have experienced high levels of stress because they were comparing themselves to others. This shows that any simple thing, such as comparing ourselves to others, could be a source of stress.

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Defining stress

Scientifically, stress could be defined as “a mental tension that arises in uncontrollable situations and results in a compensatory psychological and physiological response (Lovallo, 2016)”. Stress alters our cognitive and emotional processes, and it became a common part of life that results from a build-up of mental and/or physical pressures to a level that we find overwhelming. Bear in mind that stress is the body’s natural defence against ‘danger’ whereby our bodies produce hormones to mobilize their system to fight or flight a dangerous situation. This is nothing new and I’m sure many are aware of this fact.

Good stress

As mentioned earlier, stress is not a mental health problem in and of itself. It is the modern-day effect of an evolutionary mechanism known as ‘fight or flight’, designed to save our distant ancestors from dangers in the wild. The ‘fight or flight’ response refers to the physiological changes that occur in our body in the presence of danger. Imagine you are facing a big bear in the woods (that’s a major threat to your life). At that moment, you may feel your chest hurt, your blood pressure soar, your muscles tense, your heart race, you shake and sweat, and your saliva dry up. This physiological arousal occurs to help you gear up and run from the bear or fight the bear. Once you have decided on your action and survived (maybe heavily injured because you decided to fight the bear), the physiological arousal will quickly subside.

Bad stress

You will rarely encounter a bear attack in modern times, and it is more likely that you get stressed because of work pressure, debts, looming deadlines, or difficulties with personal relationships. The problem here is the stress doesn’t end (like with the bear attack) and so the physiological effects don’t disappear. If the stress is constantly in the background and doesn’t disappear it will create something experts call allostatic overload. Scientifically, allostasis means achieving stability through changes (McEwen, 2008). Chronically dysregulated allostasis leads to allostatic overload which simply represents the wear and tear of our system that stems from either too much stress or poor management of allostasis (e.g., not turning off the coping response when it is no longer needed).

Bread and Pastry

- ◇ Bread loaves
- ◇ Breakfast bread
- ◇ Bread rolls
- ◇ Sourdough bread and pizza
- ◇ Savoury pies and pastries
- ◇ Sweet pies and pastries

Bread is an essential part of Balkan cuisine, serving as the culinary foundation of almost every meal. Whether it's flatbread, everyday loaves, or elaborate centrepieces, bread and pastries hold a special place in daily food experiences in the Balkans.

Sweet and savoury pies and pastries can be made quickly or can challenge you to new culinary achievements and adventures. These recipes range from simple and satisfying to complex and impressive, ensuring there's something for every skill level and occasion.

Embracing the Art of Bread Making

Bread making in the Balkans is more than just a daily task; it's an art form. The variety and creativity involved in bread and pastry making reflect the region's rich culinary heritage.

Here are some highlights:

Vegan Loaves: These are perfect for those who prefer plant-based diets. They are hearty, flavourful, and made with wholesome ingredients.

Milk Loaves: Soft and slightly sweet, these loaves are ideal for breakfast or as a snack.

Bread Rolls and Tear-and-Share Bread: These are perfect for gatherings and family meals. They are fun to make and even more fun to eat.

Sourdough Bread and Pizza: Sourdough brings a tangy flavour and a chewy texture that is hard to resist. Making sourdough at home can be a rewarding challenge.

Savoury Pies and Pastries: Filled with vegetables, meats, and cheeses, these are perfect for any meal.

Sweet Pies and Pastries: These treats can range from simple fruit-filled pies to more elaborate pastries.

The Joy of Fresh Bread

The experience of eating fresh bread in the Balkans is unmatched. The aroma of freshly baked bread wafting through the air, the satisfying crunch of the crust, and the soft, fluffy interior are all part of the daily bread ritual. This cookbook aims to bring that experience into your home, with recipes that celebrate the best of Balkan bread and pastry traditions.

Baking Tips

Kneading: Proper kneading is essential for developing gluten, which gives bread its structure. Don't rush this process.

Proofing: Allow enough time for the dough to rise. This is crucial for achieving the right texture and flavour.

Baking: Each recipe includes specific baking instructions, but a general rule is to ensure your oven is preheated and to follow the recommended times closely.

This chapter on bread and pastry will guide you through the process of creating delicious, homemade baked goods that are deeply rooted in Balkan traditions. Whether you're an experienced baker or a novice, these recipes will help you create beautiful and tasty breads and pastries that will delight your family and friends.

Happy baking,
Jelena

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What is a torte?

Torte is a cake with added elegance, sophistication, and luxury. Imagine the layers upon layers of the rich, bourness and nutty-sounding with luxuriously flavoured, vanilla-scented, scrumptious creams and mousses embedded in between. Plus, include some chopped fresh fruits, hazelnut praline, chopped pistachio, or chocolate curls, and there it is- **the torte.**

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Vegan Recipes

- ◇ Savoury dishes
- ◇ Savoury bakes
- ◇ Sweet bakes

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Vegan Recipes

You might be surprised to find a chapter on savoury vegan dishes in a baking cookbook. However, just as we seek balance in nature and life, it is important to establish and maintain balance in our diet. Recently, I have felt the societal and personal pressures of aging, prompting me to scrutinize my own dietary choices and explore a vegan diet.

Growing up in Serbia, a vegan diet was not unusual, although it wasn't specifically named or categorized as such. Serbians, as Orthodox Christians, observe a 40-day fasting period before both Christmas and Easter, as well as on Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year. During these fasting periods, the food is primarily vegan, with the addition of fish and honey. Fish has always been considered a luxury, while honey, a traditional sweetener, has been cherished for centuries.

I am not here to delve into the theological aspects of these customs but to focus on the food. The fasting dishes, often made with vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, and honey, were seasonal and preservable, a tradition still well-kept in the Balkans. Necessity and available resources drove people to create and perfect these vegan dishes over time.

Cakes, pies, bread, and more from the Balkans and beyond.

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"Here we suggest that baking could be one of the techniques that will help you manage stress, have some fun and eat delicious food."

Dr Boban Simonovic

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