

Theme Music

Marion Kane:

Once in a while you meet someone who's a kindred spirit. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®, and welcome to "Sittin' in the Kitchen®." Gabriella Gershenson is a food journalist based in New York. Her wonderful work has appeared in publications like *Saveur*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe* and *Tablet*. On a recent trip to the Big Apple, I was thrilled to pick up the conversation we started over a decade ago comparing our favourite Jewish foods and discussing our shared heritage in Riga, Latvia.

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Marion Kane:

Gabriella, when we met in 2004 at the James Beard Awards Dinner we agreed to do a tour of food not served by a waiter. We made an arrangement to go to 10 places the next day. Only two out of 10 don't exist today. That's a stellar record of your discernment.

Gabriella Gershenson:

We went to Pakistan Tea House which has closed which is just so sad but that's the kind of place where you can eat Pakistani specialties 24 hours a day because it's really there to service the taxi drivers of New York. I think we went to Fried Dumpling on Moscow Street in Chinatown which I'm pretty sure it's still five dumplings for a dollar and people are just making dumplings by hand all day.

Marion Kane:

I remember you recommended Russ & Daughters and Kossar's Bialys.

Gabriella Gershenson:

Kossar's Bialys is still there and Russ & Daughters is flourishing. Russ & Daughters is ancient. It's really one of the only few places that is a true relic of the Jewish Lower East Side. It's a fourth generation, family-run business that started out as a herring vendor selling herring out of barrels and now it's really a pre-eminent delicatessen not only in New York but in the world. They have branched out since our interview in 2004. They have the café on the lower East Side that is really beautiful and just sort of expands on that spotless aesthetic of the appetizing store that they have on Houston Street. They also have a location at the Jewish Museum on 5th Avenue which is kosher. They're really as entrenched as they were in the Jewish food culture of New York.

Marion Kane:

You're a kindred soul in your taste of eateries. You're also a kindred soul in three major things. Your family is from Riga, Latvia and my family is from Riga on my mother's side. You studied in Montreal. I was born in Montreal and my father was born and raised in Montreal. And you like prunes (laughs). I was an eccentric child and I requested my mother make prune soufflé out of her *Joy of Cooking* at my birthday. In anticipation of this interview I made the prune soufflé and it was delicious. How did you come to be ashamed of eating prunes?

Gabriella Gershenson:

First of all, I love the oxymoron of prune soufflé because people think of prunes as very fibrous heavy things and soufflé is light as air so I love that oxymoron. I just always loved prunes. There are a lot of foods that I liked as a kid that weren't particularly popular. I also liked raw green peppers. As a kid, and I am a daughter of immigrants, you learn that there is stigma around food very early on as much as you learn to celebrate food and I think that it doesn't take much to see why there might be a stigma around prunes.

Marion Kane:

So Montreal. You went to McGill. Both my parents to McGill. What do you remember about Montreal?

Gabriella Gershenson:

First of all, I make a point to go back as often as possible because I am just in love with Montreal. When I was young my preoccupation with food and especially with pastry was definitely going full force so I was very much enjoying trying out all of the Canadian candy bars that I'd never heard of. I really liked the fact, and I still do, that Montreal has a real French pastry and bakery culture so you can eat very well and eat things that generally are not available in North America. You can eat those foods in Montreal affordably. So I was just pastry shop hopping. I totally fell in love with Schwartz's smoked meat. I really enjoyed that city while I lived there.

Marion Kane:

Another thing we have in common is Riga, Latvia. You were born in the U.S. but your parents came to North America in 1975. You wrote an article called "Riga Revisited: A Latvian Homecoming". It was beautiful.

Gabriella Gershenson:

I'm a first-generation American so to me Latvia was a place that loomed large in my identity and yet it was purely spun out of fantasy. It was a place that was pieced together by whatever I learned from my family which wasn't really that much because my parents were Soviet Jews and my grandparents are essentially Holocaust survivors so it's a really tricky history.

Marion Kane:

How did they survive the Holocaust?

Gabriella Gershenson:

My grandmother, her mother, and her uncle basically got on a train from Riga and just kept travelling deeper and deeper into the Soviet republics. My grandmother fled. By the time she was in Uzbekistan, she was without a mother and without her uncle. They both died. My grandmother and her mother both contracted typhus. My great-uncle just didn't wake up one morning during the journey. It was a very difficult journey. My grandmother's mother did not survive her illness whereas my grandfather was put on a bicycle and told to ride into Russia because he was living with his family as a 19-year-old on the border of Russia and Latvia and he went into the army and was wounded on his first day. His family was executed in the place where they lived. He had a whole village full of family and his sister survived. She wasn't living there. She was already older and married.

Marion Kane:

Oh, what a brutal history of Latvia. Let's turn to a happier topic. My mother used to talk about the food of her childhood. She fled at 16. She referred and had nostalgia for herrings, beets. She made borscht – cold and hot. She made Beef Stroganoff - a fantastic version - coulbiac, pirozhki and other Russian things. But she didn't make Latvian dishes because she was traumatized by the way Latvians acted. She spoke Latvian and she never acknowledged it. She spoke six languages including Russian and German. How did you find the food in Riga?

Gabriella Gershenson:

I just want to say it makes me feel warm inside to hear about your mom because my grandmother spoke five languages and she had such a beautiful childhood even though at 15 it was pretty much cut off abruptly. It's amazing, the roots and the culture that can really get into a person and who they are before the world falls apart. I think about that a lot, actually. So, Latvian food – I embarked on this journey with *Saveur* magazine and my parents also came for this trip which was incredible. To kind of find the roots of the culinary nostalgia that my parents felt for Riga and my father has a real sweet tooth like I do and he really appreciates great pastry. Latvia had a great café culture that really took a lot from the Hungarian pastry culture. My mother – I'm trying to think of what she liked. I feel like I remember her just talking about having coffee with whipped cream in it. There was just really good ingredients. Latvia wasn't as bereft of raw materials as the rest of the Soviet Union so they were still getting access to good dairy products. Even though they were Jewish, they were eating pork. My grandfather was buying ham when they were growing up. My grandfather has very fond memories of the huge market in Riga which is stored in five Zeppelin hangars. It's these huge hangars that are now just full of freshwater fish, lots and lots of dairy. Over the years, I'm sure a lot of people can appreciate this, you hear your family talking about how good the bread was where they were from. In the United States you couldn't really get good bread until recently.

Marion Kane:

My mother used to buy sweet and sour rye that she said was indigenous to Latvia in Edmonton, Alberta, where they lived. Have you had sweet and sour rye?

Gabriella Gershenson:

I don't know if what I had was sweet and sour rye but when I went to Latvia it's a different thing. It is sweet and sour. It's dark. It has a heft to it. You can actually get imported Latvian rye bread in New York. There's a company called Storye that I wrote about in *Saveur*. It's very expensive but if you want to taste it you can actually find it and it might even be sold online. Ostensibly for the story we traced my parents' steps. We wanted to see if any of the cafés they remember were there. There was one that was still there but it was really a shadow of itself and the quality was very low. The nice upside to the story was that my parents started to feel the familiar when we were experiencing home cooking. We met a really lovely couple who had young children and we were invited to the *dacha* of their mother-in-law and just being there and basically eating from the land and eating great homemade food with Latvian ingredients was what started to bring my mother back to what she remembered.

Marion Kane:

My mother went back to Latvia in 2000 when my dad died. But she wouldn't let any of her children go with her. I want to go. Reading your article and speaking to you is very emotional today and I want to go to Latvia. Gabriella, I've made some of your recipes. Lebanese Stuffed Zucchini is not your recipe but it was delicious. It was a sensation -zucchini stuffed with ground meat and tomatoes and rice. How did you come upon that recipe?

Gabriella Gershenson:

First of all, I have to correct you. None of the recipes that run with my stories are mine *per se*. I wish I had that skill but the recipes that run with my stories have been developed by other people whether it's the test kitchen or sometimes my mom and I collaborate so I just have to give credit where credit is due.

Marion Kane:

Your mom is a caterer with her own YouTube show.

Gabriella Gershenson:

Yeah, my mom's amazing. I'm really the product of her rearing. My passion for food is a direct result of her passion for food. She does contribute a borscht recipe to a book that I am an editor on. It's based on the feature that ran in *Tablet*, which is a great Jewish publication called "The 100 Most Jewish Foods". So if you haven't seen this feature online, it's so much fun to look at. It's fun to look at on your phone because it's very interactive. We basically put together a semi-controversial list with the editors of *Tablet* on what the 100 most Jewish foods are.

Marion Kane:

Could you name your five favourite Jewish foods?

Gabriella Gershenson:

Yes. Then we'll get back to that delicious stuffed squash.

Marion Kane:

Yeah.

Gabriella Gershenson:

I haven't forgotten. To be honest, I don't know if these foods are Jewish or if they're simply Eastern European and that is really one of the central questions around, "What is Jewish food?" because we're a nomadic people so our food culture is very much world culture. The first food that comes to mind is yeast dough poppy strudel. I suppose I have to say matzo ball soup but I think that would be inauthentic. I think more than matzo ball soup I really love herring. I love herring and this is the Russian way to eat it – I like salted herring more than pickled herring and I like it with boiled potatoes. I love cottage cheese so I would say cottage cheese with egg noodles – delicious. Or cottage cheese with potatoes. Again, super, super fresh off the boat Eastern European way to eat it. Geez. That's three and I have to pick two more.

Marion Kane:

You don't have to name five. Go back to the Lebanese Stuffed Zucchini and the other two dishes I want to mention – your mother's gravlax. It was sensational. And the Gâteau Basque from David Lebovitz – I took it to my office and I had love for half an hour. I'm popular in the office because of Gâteau Basque.

Gabriella Gershenson:

That's great. I'm sure you're popular even without Gâteau Basque but it never hurts. So, Lebanese Stuffed Squash. I've been writing about food for a long time and I've been writing about food in Israel for a long time and I was at the farmer's market this summer, my favourite time of year, and summer squash were in season and I saw koosa squash which is pale green – really beautiful muted green colour.

I thought I'm pretty sure that koosa squash is what's used in I wasn't sure if it was Palestinian stuffed squash or Lebanese but I had a hunch that this is the right vegetable.

Marion Kane:

How do you spell that?

Gabriella Gershenson:

K-o-o-s-a. So I bought some and then I came home and I started to Google to see if I could confirm my hunch and lo and behold there were several recipes and one of them was on Epicurious and it was very straightforward. It was a stuffed squash with a tomato sauce and the meat – I used ground turkey – the recipe called for ground beef but the meat was spiced with allspice. I only had some allspice so I substituted in some cinnamon. I went a little bit off the book but my husband and I were like you, "How is this so good?" It was quick and it was delicious and it was so soulful. It felt like, "This is home cooking right here."

Marion Kane:

Let's end on what you're doing now. What do you think is your best work?

Gabriella Gershenson:

That's a really hard question to answer. As you know, writers are always trying to outdo themselves. I feel like we have to prove ourselves every single time. I do have to say I'm very, very proud of this feature that came out with *Tablet*, "The 100 Most Jewish Foods". I've worked on a lot of big packages like at *Saveur* we did "The *Saveur* 100". At *Time Out New York* we did "The 100 Best Foods I Ate This Year" so you see a bit of a trend. There's something about seeing the cumulative ... just the effect of all these Jewish foods written about with intention and with attitude varying from nostalgia and right up to things that really make you cry to hilarious stories about Cholent. Seeing this body of work in one place about all of these Jewish foods and also the people who contributed are a very interesting who's-who. We have Yotam Ottolenghi on the one hand. Eric Ripert actually wrote about Gefilte Fish so it just gave me chills. It's also beautifully executed so recently that's one that really comes to mind.

Marion Kane:

I've never asked that question before. It came to me. Gabriella, it's fabulous to see you again. It's been 14 years. It feels like 14 days. Thank you very much.

Gabriella Gershenson:

Thank you Marion. It's a pleasure.

Theme Music

Marion Kane:

That was my conversation with Gabriella Gershenson. Find her on Twitter @gabiwrites and read my blogpost with recipes. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®. You can find more stories like this one at marionkane.com and in Apple Podcasts. Thank you for listening.

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