

BOOKS FOR COOKS | PAGE 5

## Tru colors

Rick Tramonto sheds the chef whites and heads home for his latest cookbook, Steak with Friends, an ode to big flavors and the City of Big Shoulders.

## SHOPPING SMART | PAGE 3

### Going gluten-free

Gluten, a wheat protein, also can be found in soups and even chocolates, all the more reason to read labels and ask plenty of questions.

A proper Southern cupcake | Page 2

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 ACOK

BY SEANAN FORBES

ames 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?"

Gottwald was a boy when his grandmother first took him hunting in the woods. Now, in a classroom, he does as she did, taking a knife and parting muscle from muscle. He's effortlessly speeding along when the instructor asks him to leave some work for his classmates. To tell the story right, time must be bent back further.

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, telling his wife and daughter to flee. They flee. Maria never sees her father

again. She and her mother scav-

enge to survive. They eat watermelons (which Maria, to this day, cannot abide). They dig up potatoes and eat them raw. When they can, they catch and cook rabbits. They creep into farmers' fields - fields and farms being claimed by soldiers grab what they can and run. They sleep rough. Their aim is simple: Stay alive. Maria develops typhoid. In a

makeshift Red Cross hospital, doctors tend to the girl. As soon

her . . . to nowhere. Her mother is exhausted; Maria, ill. Seeing a stopped train, they request permission to board. They don't know the des-

as she can stand, they release

tination — a concentration camp. Maria's hands and face develop blotches, and illness becomes a lifesaver. In the crowd and filth, passengers fear infection. When the doors open so that waste can be disposed of and people can be sprayed with water (the Nazis' concession to

thirst), someone throws mother

They encounter Hungarian

and child from the train.

soldiers, who take them to another military hospital. A doctor conceals the underage civilian in the basement and treats her for typhoid. Maria's mother hides in the forest, visiting her daughter only at night. The hospital is bombed.

Above Maria, there rests the uneasy wreckage of a building. Her mother finds nobody alive. The doctor returns, squirms

into the basement and brings Maria to the surface, but there is no safety in the remnants of the town. Unsheltered again, Maria forages, traps, hunts ... and en-

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MORE INSIDE FOR BOICESCO'S RECIPES, SEE PAGE 3A | FOR MORE PHOTOS, GO TO SUNTIMES.COM/LIFESTYLES/FOOD

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. | COURTESY MARIA BOILESCO

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 2010 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

FOOD 3A

# A GRANDMOTHER'S CÜLÏNÄRY 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 Ger-

The soldiers put her in a labor camp. In this dire place, she discovers the importance of small graces. She pre-

pares food and serves it cordially. Maria escapes and finds her way to an orphanage. Actress Leona Ziegan and her husband, George, adopt Maria, but not to be a cherished family member: as a servant.

In cooking, Maria flourishes. From

seed to service, no element of food eludes her. In her kitchen, gathered fruit becomes pastries, preserves or wine, and nothing is wasted. The girl's gifts earn something rare: security.

### A grandmother's lessons Sixteen years pass. The war ends. The Ziegans plan to leave for the Hon-

duras. Maria hungers for freedom. In her free time, she cooks for another family and hoards her pay. She has hope, talent and determination. She wants her family — what remains of it. A priest in a Salzburg church has dedicated himself to reuniting families.

One day, after mass, he notes Maria's crooked finger. He knows another woman — an older woman — whose hand bears the same shape. That afternoon, he brings Maria to her mother. Maria falls in love and gets married. By the time her family leaves for

America, she has a baby (James Gottwald's mother) in her arms. In time, Maria acquires land in Pennsylvania: earth to plant, game to hunt, cellarage for storing fruits and vegetables.

Maria Boicesco — now Babchi, or grandmother — teaches her grand-

children about every element of food. Amazed, the 5-year old James Gottwald watches Babchi feed egg shells to chickens and plant matches alongside pepper plants. Peppers, Maria explains, need earth that's high in sulfur. In the rain, sulfur will move from the matches to the soil. It takes a dead fish to bring the lesson home. The boy buries his golden carp on Maria's land, and grass grows

lush and thick over the grave. "Wow," Gottwald remembers thinking, "it's true." Matches and carp make good soil. Gottwald is one of four brothers. Even when they're young, between the

ages of 6 and 10, Maria makes them work. Despite that - or because of it they look forward to spending sum-Early in the morning, Babchi sits beside cows, squirting milk across the

barn into the children's wide mouths. Gottwald says no milk tastes as good as that did, arching warm from cow to Later, she and the boys walk to the lake. They carry two empty five-gallon buckets. The children catch smallmouth bass, sunfish, bullhead, catfish and Babchi's favorite, perch. When

the brothers head home, it's two boys to a bucket. Their chores aren't over. They have to pick clover for the rabbits - more five-gallon buckets. Chickens and pigs, too, must be fed. Meanwhile, Babchi stands at an out-

door butcher-block table, cleaning the day's catch. It's pitch dark, Gottwald remembers, "and she'd be rocking through those fish." The pigs get the scraps. Babchi's garage holds not cars, but two big freezers and countless jars of

food. Behind the house, there's a smoker. To nourish her children's families, Maria raises one pig per household. Every year, each family is given enough bacon and pork chops to last until the next litter of pigs grows up to

Some family members go into the food business. (Their scraps, too, feed Babchi's pigs.) At 11, Gottwald works as a dishwasher, earning his pocket money. He learns the industry, from bussing to

be slaughtered and smoked or frozen.

restaurant's kitchen, he's in Babchi's. By 16, he is a sous chef. Like grandmother, like grandson. Celebrating a life On Sunday, Babchi turns 80. She

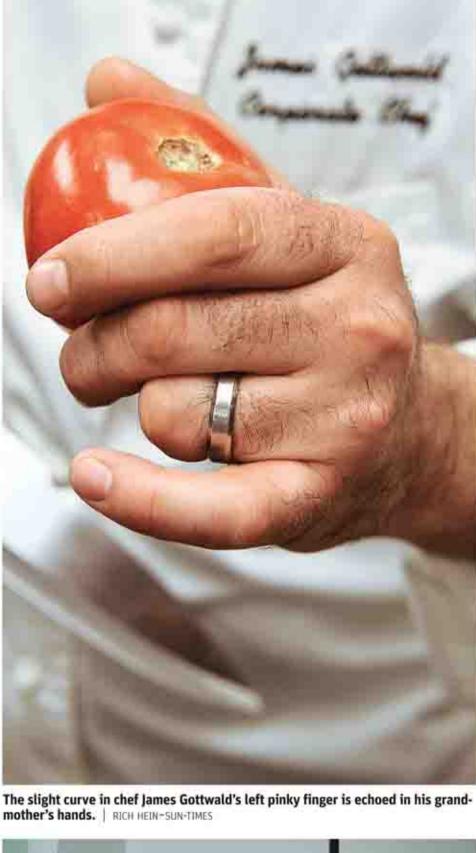
cooking, and when he isn't in the

## lives in Mansfield, Pa. with one of

Gottwald's aunts and uncles, who own an organic dairy. She's starting to slow down, but she cooks for the field hands, who eat like

hordes. She dishes out beef stew, huge portions served with the same hospitality she learned in a different era and another land. Her warmth draws people from beyond the farm's borders. Locals call her

Mother Mare, short for Mother Mary and yes, they know her name's Maria.





from her recipes, including a Michigan restaurant," Gottwald recalls. sour cherry wine. She liked it better For Barbara, Maria served as a conthan she did the blueberry." sultant and gave recipes. Barbara, His blueberry wine isn't bad, but Gottwald says, "will bring some of her

Babchi says the berries aren't as good as those picked on her land. There's no

need to worry about her palate fading, then? Laughter bursts from Gottwald, along with a delighted, "God, no!" For her birthday, the whole family

will come. Farmhands will come. The town will come. Gottwald estimates 150 to 200 celebrants will attend and oh, there will be food. A roasted pig, that's certain. There's a guy who owns a butcher

shop. Now that Babchi is getting older, he brings her venison.



Boicesco cooking at her daughter's

restaurant in Millerton, Pa., circa 1985.

pies, which are my grandma's pies." And to top the pies? "My uncle's parents have a farm next door," Gottwald says. "They make ice cream - no flavoring, just sugar, eggs and milk. Un-

pasteurized milk has layers of flavor. "All of my memories revolve around food: the gathering of food, the celebration of food. It's pretty cool."

Gottwald pauses for a while. "I'm trying to instill this in my son. Gottwald is looking forward to "that moment in the evening when every-

body gathers around her and we get that picture." It will have to be a panoramic shot. From his Babchi, he expects one question: "Why are you making such a

big fuss?" Being a chef and a loving grandson, Gottwald plans to make something special. He isn't certain what, but it will come from the water. Babchi loves

"Every time I see her," Gottwald says, "I bring some form of lobster, smoked salmon and crab." Gottwald is still young, and his little finger isn't as bent as his grand-

plicit in his bones. Gottwald is always aware of what he owes her. He isn't only a chef because his grandmother could cook. He's alive

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because she could cook.

based in New York and London.

mother's, but that future curve is im-

MAKES ABOUT 8 PIECES FILLING

1/2 medium onion, small dice

3 ounces chopped bacon 2 tablespoons butter

BABCHI'S GOLUMPKI

large garlic clove, finely minced cup cooked and cooled rice

venison 1/4 teaspoon chopped thyme

pound ground beef or

1/4 teaspoon chopped parsley 1 tablespoon kosher salt 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper (about 10 good cranks from the

## pepper mill) WRAPPERS

head green cabbage cups hot chicken stock 2

cup tomato sauce, preferably homemade (see Note) Preheat oven to 350 de-

Sweat onion and bacon in butter over low heat until transparent, then add garlic

and cook for 5 more minutes.

Combine cooled onion mix-

Let cool.

ture with rice, beef, herbs, salt and pepper. Mix well, then refrigerate. Remove and discard core from cabbage. Place cabbage

GRANDMA'S PIEROGI

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

in a pot of boiling water for 5

method: Heat cored cabbage in microwave for 1 minute, let cool, then peel off the tender leaves. When you hit tough leaves, pop cabbage back in for another minute.) Remove thick vein from cab-

bage leaves. Place 2 to 3 ounces of beef mixture in center of each leaf and roll into pouches as you would a burrito or egg roll. Place golumpki, seam side down, in a shallow roasting pan. Add chicken stock to the

roasting pan. Spoon 1 tablespoon of tomato sauce over each golumpki. Cover with foil and bake in a preheated 350degree oven for about 1 hour. Let golumpki rest for 20 min-

utes in the pan. Serve with sour cream and extra tomato sauce. Note: Babchi's tomato sauce is simply crushed tomatoes with onions, garlic and fresh

basil to taste. Maria Boicesco 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

## MAKES 28 PIEROGI These freeze very well. Boil

them first and store them "with a tad of melted butter." DOUGH

cups all-purpose flour teaspoon salt cup lukewarm water

tablespoon sour cream FILLING

tablespoon butter

Spanish or yellow onion, small dice 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground

divided 2 large baking potatoes 1/2 teaspoon salt 2 tablespoons cottage cheese For the dough: Combine all

ingredients in a mixing bowl.

black pepper (10 good

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 (this is fond, French for

few tablespoons of warm water to prevent burning. Keep adding water as the moisture evaporates, and the onions will slowly caramelize.

"base"). Deglaze pan with a

This will take about 20 to 25 Peel, quarter and boil pota-

Mash potatoes, and combine

with half the caramelized

Top with caramelized onions or sour cream, or both. PHOTOS COURTESY JAMES GOTTWALD onions, salt, 1/8 teaspoon black cranks from pepper mill), pepper and cottage cheese. (Reserve the rest of the

caramelized onions to top

pierogi.)

out the dough. Roll out to approximately 1/8-inch thick and cut into 3-inch circles. Place 1 tablespoon of filling in the center of each circle. Fold over to create a half-moon

Cool filling while you roll

shape and pinch sides closed, using water to seal. Set pierogi down, not allowing them to touch each other (the raw dough is tender and tends to stick).

Boil pierogi in salted water until they float, approximately 2 minutes. Remove from water, then sear in a frying pan with butter until lightly brown. Serve with sour cream and reserved caramelized onions.

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

Maria Boicesco



"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

seafood.