

# Ukrainian cookbook wins acclaim, racks up sales

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Olia Hercules, author of the Ukrainian cookbook “Mamushka,” was born in Kakhovka, Ukraine, in 1984. Hercules says she never dreamt about writing a cookbook, but rediscovered her love for her family’s recipes after a trip to Italy.

Photo by Mike English

One might assume that a person who has written a successful cookbook, which has sold almost 100,000 copies worldwide and been translated into four languages, must have been into cooking from an early age.

But the author of “Mamushka,” Ukrainian Olia Hercules, says she was a reluctant chef in her early years. “When I was a teenager my dad used to make me cook every Sunday, but I didn’t enjoy it – I didn’t want to be forced,” she says.

“Mamushka,” which is full of mouth-watering recipes, beautiful photographs and engaging childhood stories, is a celebration of Ukrainian food.

“It’s a nod to my family,” says Hercules, who was born in Kakhovka, a city of 38,000 people in Kherson Oblast, some 626 kilometers southeast of Kyiv.

The word “mamushka” is not a real word; it comes from the 1991 U.S. movie “The Addams Family” where, in one scene, the characters suddenly start speaking a made-up Eastern European language and dancing the Mamushka – “the dance of brotherly love.”

“Our whole family found this part of the movie irresistibly hilarious, and since then my brother and I renamed our mom Mamushka,” Hercules explains in her book.

“Mamushka” is not just about Ukrainian food. Apart from its Ukrainian recipes for almost every occasion, such as borshch, varenyky, holubtsi, salo, paska (Ukrainian Easter bread) and even blackcurrant vodka, there are also Georgian, Armenian, Tatar and Azerbaijani dishes.



“Mamushka: Recipes from Ukraine & Beyond” is a 240-page book with more than 100 recipes from Eastern Europe. It’s available on Amazon.com. (Ben Robinson)

“The food all over Eastern Europe is different,” Hercules says. “My grandma lived in Uzbekistan, Central Asia for about 10 years. We have Armenian relatives, Moldovan connections, friends from Ossetia and Tatarstan. My great grandmothers lived in Bessarabia, near Moldova and spoke some Moldovan and cooked the dishes from the area.”



Some recipes are Hercules' own, she says, like the rhubarb & radish pickle, which she likes to serve with "kasha (porridge) and pechionka (liver), for example."

Apart from selling so well, "Mamushka" has also won the Fortnum & Mason Debut Food Book of 2016 award and, in 2015, Hercules was named the Observer's Rising Star of the year.

But the best thing?

"It's definitely receiving letters from people, sometimes handwritten," Hercules says. "An old lady from Australia once wrote me a letter saying she grew up with stories like these – her parents escaped Ukraine when she was a child during the Second World War. This kind of response from people is better than getting any award."

She also gets letters from British and American people who didn't realize Ukrainian food was so rich and diverse.

Hercules's got used to home-grown vegetables and fruit as a child. She stresses the importance of good ingredients. "You make Ukrainian food amazing by taking care about what kind of ingredients you cook."

### **Palermo-born passion**

Hercules, who now lives in London, said her "food awakening didn't happen until my year abroad in Italy, in a restaurant in Palermo." She was working as a waitress when the chef gave her a bowl of Spaghetti Ai Ricci (spaghetti with sea urchins) for lunch. "It was amazing, I just thought it was the most incredible thing," she says.

Hercules then rediscovered Ukrainian food and started cooking more often.

After working as a journalist for a few years after graduation, Hercules quit her job during the 2008 global financial crisis and retrained as a chef in London. She then worked in restaurants for about two years, doing 18-hour shifts. After giving birth to her son Sasha, she returned to work as a recipe developer.

"But then the company folded and I was left with no job. It was 'single mom, no job' desperation," Hercules recalls.



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“Mamushka” started as a way to stay busy. She also wrote for Cook, supplement to the Guardian, a London-based newspaper. The Guardian’s video unit noticed her talent in a test video she submitted.

“He called the publisher Faber & Faber, and they offered me a book deal. Within a month three big publishers were fighting for the rights to the book,” Hercules says, adding that one of her conditions was to be able to go to Ukraine to shoot the food. “You just can’t do it in a studio in London, you have to have the real thing,” she says.

Most of the photographs were shot in Ukraine’s Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts, while some were taken in a house in London.

Hercules is finishing her second cookbook, which will be called “Kaukasis: A culinary journey through Georgia, Azerbaijan and beyond.” The book is due in August.

“It’s a re-creation of a trip that I took with my parents and brother when I was 3 years old. We drove from Kakhovka to Baku through Georgia, Chechnya and other places.”

The book will feature Georgian, Azerbaijani and Armenian recipes, and stories “of real people and families.”

*The cookbook “Mamushka” by Olia Hercules can be ordered on Amazon for \$22.89.*