

COMFORT FOOD

Pierogi

Few things can lift one's late-winter spirits like comfort food and I've discovered the perfect remedy: Pierogi. Either doughy or crunchy on the outside, filled with gooey cheese and hot mashed potatoes on the inside, slathered in sour cream and topped with caramelized onions, pierogi are one of the simplest yet heartiest comforts around. Thanks to Inna Kondramashin, we can enjoy authentic pierogi in Lancaster!

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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My first pierogi encounter happened around age 10, when a neighborhood friend brought over a snack of what was likely Mrs. T's Pierogies. My initial reaction was they looked strange. However, I also don't recall my friend sharing his bounty, which indicated to me that pierogi are probably amazing.

What's a pierogi, you ask? The word "pierogi" is Polish (and is plural) and is a generic term for filled dumplings. This Eastern and Central European treat is a distant cousin of the Italian ravioli and Chinese pork dumpling. Various fillings comprise their soul: onions, cheddar cheese, potatoes, mushrooms and meat. There are even dessert pierogi made with fresh fruit, powdered sugar and, of course, butter. Despite the area's strong German heritage, pierogi tend to be uncommon here. Then, one day as I was perusing the stands at Lancaster Marketplace, I was floored to come across one solely dedicated to pierogi.

CARRYING ON A FAMILY TRADITION

Credit for that goes to Inna Kondramashin, a small business owner, pierogi chef, wife and mother of five, in no particular order. The force behind Inna's Pierogi Shop is the daughter of Ukrainian immigrants who owned a business making European wafers before coming to the United States. Inna's grandparents eventually followed, reuniting the family. Inna's mother, Tanya, carried on the family tradition and started a catering business.

As a child, Inna remembers watching her elders work in the kitchen. Traditionally a day would be dedicated to making pierogi. Her grandmother would cover the entire table in flour, with potatoes going in the middle, and everyone would gather around to make pierogi. Boards covered in flour would be placed on the table for filled pierogi, ready to be boiled. Most pierogi were preserved in the freezer for future use, but some would be eaten right away.

Inna's vegan Potato & Onion Pierogi, served with sour cream, chives and caramelized onions. The vibrant Ukrainian-made linen tablecloth is from the Etsy shop UkrWork.



The process begins with peeling potatoes.

Rolling and cutting perfectly shaped dough by hand to make pierogi.

Forming pierogi by hand around fillings of potato and onion. Pierogi are flash-boiled in order to seal the dough ahead of serving or freezing.

Baking sheets allow flash-boiled pierogi to dry before freezing.



When preparing pierogi for a meal, Inna suggests boiling them before sautéing in a pan with onions and finishing them with sour cream. “Very traditional, and that’s the way I like them,” she says. “That’s how Grandma used to make them; that’s the only way that I remember them. Potato cheddar pierogi are more Polish. My grandma is half Polish, half Ukrainian; she always stuck to onions.”

COMING FROM a food family, it might seem obvious that Inna would follow suit but the journey she took is anything but expected. “My passion for cooking did not start when I was a little kid,” says Inna. “I started cooking for my husband,” she says of Alex. “Three months before I got married, my mom taught me how to make borscht and plov [rice pilaf]. Other than watching my parents, that was the extent of my training.” Besides, Inna already had a career – she was an invasive cardiovascular technician. When she and Alex welcomed their fourth child, she decided to become a stay-at-home mom.

Inna ultimately found a love for the kitchen when she baked a cake for a party using a recipe given to her by her mother over the phone. Unafraid to cook without recipes and try new dishes, she cooked for family and friends, who encouraged her to start a baking business.

Following their advice and encouragement, Inna first rented a church kitchen and then a larger kitchen at a café, before opening Tanya’s Pastry Shop at Lancaster Marketplace. (Note: Lancaster Marketplace closed its doors on February 28.) Named after her mother, Inna’s menu included the Ukrainian and Eastern European dishes she grew up with. “Many of the dishes didn’t connect [with customers] and were perhaps too unfamiliar,” Inna says. “The menu I had planned out and tried for 30 days was not working,” she recalls. “People did not know the culture. They were, I guess, scared to try new foods.”

So, she went back to the drawing board, contemplating which foods from her culture she could make that people would be familiar with and would want to buy. Her lightbulb moment was pierogi. “I said I’d never do it because it was too much work and I didn’t think it would ever go,” she says. To her surprise, “it went well the first week, even with no advertising.”

The business has since rebranded to Inna’s Pierogi Shop, moving in line with the hit food she offers.

A WHIRLWIND OF CHANGE

In December 2019, Inna started to pursue selling pierogi in other markets. Thinking there must be podcasts pertaining to the subject, she discovered an online workshop created by a food purchasing agent whose intent was to supply small food companies with the knowledge to reach larger audiences. As a result, rebranding and new packaging came next, along with an unexpected overhaul of her grandmother’s pierogi recipe that came about in early 2020, when Inna made it her goal to try a vegan diet. She immediately realized she wouldn’t be able to eat pierogi.

She went to work, tweaking her grandma’s recipe and then did a blind taste-test on some friends. “Every single person opted for the vegan recipe, saying it has so much more flavor. I started taking samples into

stores,” she recounts. “There was the repetition of one line: ‘I do not feel heavy after I eat your pierogi.’ Comfort does not have to bring you down. You can eat comfort food and still feel good after eating something that’s satisfying for your soul. It’s only because I decided to do a 30-day vegan diet,” she marvels. “Every so often, I’ll do vegan for a week or a day.”

Inna’s pierogi recipe pivoted to become non-GMO, plus it entailed ingredients such as organic canola oil, oat milk (which is made in-house) and cheddar cheese, plus vegan butter. Additionally, the dough does not include eggs, making it dairy-free. Eight varieties are available, a majority of which are either vegan, vegetarian and/or dairy-free.

Altering the pierogi recipe to be vegan-friendly (and healthier) opened doors. In three months – during the COVID-19 pandemic, no less – Inna went from having no wholesale customers to having more than a dozen. She credits her path from retail to adding wholesale distribution to her faith in God. She only seems to be getting warmed up. As of the start of 2021, Inna’s Pierogi will be carried by Rainforest Distribution, which works with companies such as Nora Snacks and Tate’s Bake Shop. “With this distribution company, we are excited because we can expand to supply other wholesale stores and markets,” she explains. Inna’s Pierogi are also now available at all 20 of Mom’s Organic Market locations.

“What we are trying to accomplish at Inna’s Pierogi Shop is to create a healthy comfort food – a pierogi – something that the market does not have. We’re doing that by adding organic ingredients,” says Inna. “We want people to eat comfort food, but healthy comfort food.”

GROWING, DEBT-FREE

Another remarkable discipline has been Inna’s desire to grow her business in a debt-free manner. “My husband and I took a course called Financial Peace University with Dave Ramsey. After we saw results in our personal lives, being debt-free, we decided to carry that into the business. At first, I didn’t pay myself, so I could have a debt-free journey,” she says. “We had to balance that out. My husband worked full-time, while I worked full-time here. Everything was reinvested back into the business.”

Following Ramsey’s strategy, “I had to say no to opportunities that were bigger than my financial state was. You have to get into debt to grow fast and that’s something I had to turn away. Turning that away gave me the freedom to not feel pressure to do what everyone else is doing, this pressure where I have to grow fast and I can’t develop myself,” she theorizes.

“Slow growth is necessary, not just for financial freedom but also for the impact you have on yourself and the people around you. For a business owner, before you take a loan, exhaust all of your options that will allow you to operate debt-free. The first piece of equipment that helped me was a potato peeler. I paid cash for it, saving money for three months to pay for it. These pieces of equipment will help me save on labor costs but it’s a steady, one piece at a time process.

“It’s really hard because your job demands one thing and if you can’t get it, you have to wait a certain amount of time. Controlling your own [sense of]

Inna is sharing her Polish and Ukranian heritage with Lancaster through her pierogi.



Inna opened a location at Lancaster Central Market in late January.



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husband is also a clean freak so that helps the situation,” she says with a smile.

“NOT EVERYONE is called to the same thing. I stayed home for nine years with the kids. I went to school and did things other than business – business is a whole different ball game. As the kids grow older – my son was 8 when I started the business – you start involving them in the struggles. When I have a bad day, you actually talk about it. You share that with them and they take it with them, which makes them more sensitive to what you are doing. They understand when you share your deep thoughts and concerns.

“For me, it was probably my husband who pushed me toward opening a business. I think it’s the support of your spouse that makes the difference,” says Inna. “Alex and I will take a walk around the neighborhood, and there are hard days where I’m like, ‘I’m going to close the business down, I’m exhausted.’ And, he’ll say, ‘You can’t – it’s your calling, that’s what you are called to do. Through thick and thin, I’m right here.’ He will not let me quit even when I want to,” she shares. “He makes me a stronger person.”

HER CAREER PATH has taught Inna to stay humble and keep learning. “I tend to think I know it all and want to always come up with my own ideas,” she admits. “What I’ve learned is asking for help is necessary, [as is] staying humble through the process. I have asked for a lot of help, asked a lot of questions, and I’ve gotten farther than I would have ever gotten with the mentality of, ‘I know it all.’”

urgency is hard because the world doesn’t teach you that. It teaches you that if you need it, you need it now. Get a credit card, you can get it now. You can pay it off later, but why? Why put that burden on yourself?

“I still stand strong on that because of the freedom I feel for my family, having five kids, having my husband bringing in a stable income. I know with the pandemic, if I had to close down the business, I’m not carrying a financial burden to the family. I have this freedom of saying, okay, if it were to fail, I could sell my equipment and walk away.”

Inna has often been told she needs to be a contestant on *Shark Tank*, which she also resists. “Having investors is like having a loan, too. You have the pressure to bring in a paycheck for someone else and in a way, that isn’t fitting with the original vision. I feel like I have a clearer vision because I don’t have that distraction. I thought, maybe I’m selfish because I don’t want to bring someone on board but I’m doing what I was called to do. I can do it debt-free.”

MOTHERING AS A BUSINESS OWNER

Inna has found further opportunity in parenting through being a small business owner. “If you’re a mom, and you think your schedule is busy, think again,” laughs Inna. From discerning what you want to teach your children and what you want to spend your time on, “You become very intentional when you’re so busy,” she says. “Don’t ever think you can’t do it because you have a child – or two, three or four, whatever you have. Remember that your kids are watching you.

“In my experience, there are a lot of teachable moments with my kids because of opening a business,” she explains. “Some of them are very practical, like, they can make dinner because I work so much. It benefits me but it benefits them because they [are learning] practical living skills.” One such skill is cleaning the house. “It’s not because I don’t want to do it, it’s because that’s the circumstance,” Inna points out. “I work full-time and overtime, so they’ve learned to keep a clean environment. My

WHERE TO FIND INNA’S PIEROGI

Having outgrown the small space, Inna closed her Lancaster Marketplace location in January and relocated to Lancaster Central Market. She’s working on plans to operate a larger kitchen to meet wholesale demands.

In addition to visiting Inna’s Pierogi Shop at Lancaster Central Market, Inna’s Pierogi are available at Rooster Street in the Market at Wilbur, Harvest Lane Farm Market in Lititz, and Lemon Street Market in Lancaster city.

For more information, visit innaspierogishop.com.

