READING GROUP GUIDE

THE LOST BAKER OF VIENNA

A Novel

When darkness comes, look for the light…

SHARON KURTZMAN

Dear Reader,

From my earliest memories, I've loved books and food. As a girl, my parents took me to our local library every week or two, where we spent hours perusing the stacks, reading, and then selecting books to bring home. What a joy to select as many stories as I wanted! I also come by my love for food honestly. In the suburban home where I grew up, food was synonymous with love.

My childhood memories include my mother's first question to every visitor in our home: "Can I get you something to eat?" Mom, a Holocaust survivor, starved through her teen years in war-torn Europe. When I was in college and she finally opened up to me about her war experiences, she told me stories about her postwar life working in a hotel kitchen in Vienna and how, during that time, she ate whatever she could and happily gained weight. The hotel kitchen sounded like a refuge for my mother, and I sought to give that to Chana and the others working in the Empress Hotel.

My father, a Holocaust survivor from Belgium, opened a grocery store in New Jersey after he and Mom married. My parents ran the store for years until my dad took a job as a salesperson for a food distribution company; his career inspired Grandpa Aron's job in *The Lost Baker of Vienna*. I also gave Aron one of my father's favorite sayings, "You don't have to be hungry to have a little nosh."

In *The Lost Baker of Vienna*, I wanted to show how food is both a creative outlet and a way for families to connect. Researching Austrian dishes and baked goods brought me joy, much in the way it brings Chana and Elias joy. For Chana, baking brings to life pleasant memories of her father and her family before the war. For me, writing the cooking scenes in *The Lost Baker of Vienna* brought back fond memories of my parents. I'm delighted to share a handful of my favorite recipes, many that stem from my Jewish heritage and my family.

Thank you to each and every one of you for reading *The Lost Baker of Vienna*.

xox,

SHARON KURTZMAN

EVELYN'S RUGELACH

The Lost Baker of Vienna **shows how food and cooking can link us to our beloved family even after they're gone. Chana has happy memories of her father working in his bakery. Some of my most indelible memories of my mother are of her cooking in our home. Flour coating a cutting board, plump raisins resting in a bowl, or the scent of hot cooking oil were common in our kitchen. The earliest homemade cookies I remember my mom making were rugelach. I think a friend gave her the recipe, but over the years, she and I tinkered with it, and I've named it Evelyn's Rugelah after my mother. Mom's rugelach cookies were delicious, though they always came out a bit misshapen. I believe those imperfections give her homemade rugelach their charm.**

Makes 32 cookies

DOUGH INGREDIENTS

1 cup butter, softened
8 ounces cream cheese, softened
2 cups flour
½ teaspoon kosher salt
2 tablespoons sour cream

FILLING

Raisins and chopped pecan or walnuts
Semisweet chocolate chips
Apricot preserves or favorite flavor
(Note: ⅓ cup to ½ cup of filling for each rolled out circle of dough)

DUSTING OF CINNAMON SUGAR

1 cup sugar
1 tablespoon cinnamon

EGG WASH (OPTIONAL)

1 egg, beaten, + 2 tablespoons water

DIRECTIONS

Mix all the dough ingredients, rolling it into a ball. Cut the ball into 4 portions, flattening each into a disk before wrapping each in plastic wrap. Place the dough in the refrigerator and chill for at least 2 hours or overnight.

When ready to make the rugelach, preheat the oven to 350°F. Mix the sugar and cinnamon. Place a sheet of parchment paper on the counter and sprinkle with 2 tablespoons of cinnamon sugar—the parchment paper will prevent the dough from sticking. Generously sprinkle flour on a rolling pin. Leave the dough in the refrigerator, working with one portion at a time. Take 1 portion of dough and roll it into a larger circle on top of the cinnamon sugar. The circle will be about 9 inches in circumference—don't worry if it's not a perfect circle. Be careful not to roll the dough too thin. Sprinkle the top side of the dough with cinnamon sugar before filling.

Top the dough with your filling of choice: preserves, raisins and nuts, chocolate. Using a pizza cutter or a sharp knife, cut the dough into 8 slices, like slicing up a pizza. Roll each slice from the widest part, tucking the tip underneath. Line cookie sheets with parchment paper or silicone pads. Place each rugelach on the cookie sheet, point side down and about 2 inches apart. If using an egg wash, brush it lightly over the rugelach. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, until the cookies are golden. Let cool on the tray for 5 minutes, then transfer the cookies to wire racks to finish cooling.

ALL-SEASON APRICOT *MARILLENKUCHEN*

When I started researching baked goods for *The Lost Baker of Vienna*, apricot *Marillenkuchen* came up again and again. It is a classic Austrian cake made with fruit that Austria is known for. Apricots grow in abundance in the Wachau Valley, where Dürnstein is located. It is a recipe Elias plans to make one night, and though Chana can't join him, she gives him advice on the recipe. The resulting cake is both visually appealing and delicious. Since writing about *Marillenkuchen*, I became obsessed with making this cake.

In early 2024, I visited the Wachau Valley, a trip where I encountered fields of apricot trees. But it was February, and the trees were bare. Apricots are in season during the summer, and they show up in my North Carolina supermarkets in May at the earliest. To satisfy my craving for apricot *Marillenkuchen* no matter the season, I tried using canned apricots. The result was delicious! For this recipe's optional glaze, I used apricot liqueur purchased on my visit to Melk.

INGREDIENTS

2 15-ounce cans unpeeled, halved apricots, drained
4 large eggs, separated and at room temperature
½ cup plus 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
¼ cup sugar
3 tablespoons honey
½ cup sour cream
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
zest from 1 lemon (1 tablespoon)
Pinch of kosher salt
2⅓ cups all-purpose flour
1½ teaspoons baking powder

GLAZE (OPTIONAL)

¼ cup apricot preserves
1 teaspoon apricot liqueur
1 teaspoon warm water

Powdered sugar (optional)

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 375°F. Grease a 9-x-13-inch pan with butter or baking spray. If using canned apricots, drain the juice and set the apricots aside. If using fresh apricots, halve and remove the pits.

Separate egg whites and yolks into separate bowls. Add a pinch of kosher salt to the egg whites and beat until stiff peaks form—be careful not to overbeat. In a separate bowl, combine butter, sugar, and honey. Add the egg yolks to the butter, sugar, and honey mixture, and beat for about five minutes—the mixture should be creamy and pale yellow. Mix the sour cream, vanilla, and lemon zest into the butter, egg yolk, sugar, and honey mixture, then beat until well-combined. Add the baking powder to the flour, then combine in batches with the bowl of butter and eggs—careful not to over mix. Carefully, fold the egg whites into the flour/butter mixture.

Pour the batter into the pan and spread evenly. Lay the apricots on top of the batter—cut side up—during baking the cake will rise around them. Bake for 30 to 40 minutes. Test by inserting a skewer or sharp knife into the center of the cake, which should come out clean. Remove the cake from the oven and let cool on a rack. If you're going to glaze the cake mix the preserves, liqueur, and water together. Microwave the mixture for 15 to 20 seconds to make it easier to spread. Add a thin layer of glaze over the cake and fruit.

Once cooled, slice the cake into squares using the apricots as your guide. Sprinkle powdered sugar over the top (sugar is optional). Enjoy!

MOTHER/DAUGHTER CARROT CAKE

WITH BROWN BUTTER CREAM CHEESE FROSTING

Many of the early recipes Chana bakes come from collaborations with her father. After the war, she tinkers and perfects a number of those recipes. When my children were young, I loved cooking with them, and as they've moved into adulthood and kitchens of their own, I've learned from them. Years ago, my daughter made a fantastic carrot cake for our Thanksgiving dessert. She shared her recipe with me, and I've tinkered with it some since. Now this carrot cake makes an annual appearance during the holidays and it is pure chef's kiss.

CAKE

2 ½ cups flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon baking soda
1½ teaspoons cinnamon
1 teaspoon ginger
½ teaspoon nutmeg
⅛ teaspoon cloves
½ teaspoon salt
1½ cups brown sugar
½ cup white sugar
1 cup oil (using a neutral-tasting oil, either vegetable, canola, avocado, or olive oil)
4 eggs (room temperature)
¾ cup buttermilk
2½ cups grated carrots
¾ cup crushed pineapple (no need to drain)
¾ cup yellow raisins, soak in water for 15 minutes to plump, drain and dry

BROWN BUTTER CREAM CHEESE FROSTING

8 ounces cream cheese (room temperature)
½ cup plus 2 tablespoons butter, melted and browned
4 cups powdered sugar
1 tablespoon heavy cream
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 pinch salt
(Note: I tend to lightly frost the cake sides. For a thicker frosted cake, double the frosting recipe.)

½ cup roughly chopped pecans (optional garnish after frosting)

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350°F.

For the cake, first mix the flour through salt ingredients. Then in a separate bowl mix sugars, oil, and eggs. Combine the sugar,oil, and egg mixture with the buttermilk and flour mixture, alternating between the two—start with the buttermilk and end with the flour. Fold in carrots, pineapple, and raisins. Pour into two 9-inch baking pans, greased on the sides and parchment-lined on the bottoms. Bake at 350°F for 45 minutes. Pierce with a toothpick or sharp knife and if it comes out clean, it's ready. Let cool in pans for 10 to 15 minutes. Then carefully turn out onto cooling racks.

For the frosting, after browning the butter, let cool for 10 minutes in a heat-safe bowl, then place in the refrigerator. Stir once or twice as it solidifies (this will take about an hour). Combine cream cheese and cooled brown butter. Add sugar, then cream, vanilla, and salt.

Frost the top of one cake (make sure it's cooled), then add the second cake on top. Frost the top and sides. Store the cake in the refrigerator. Garnish the top with chopped pecans (optional) before serving. Enjoy!

SHARON'S CHOCOLATE PECAN PIE

After World War II, Chana and Elias find joy and comfort when they bake. As a teenager, baking also brought me comfort. At one point, I became obsessed with chocolate pecan pie. I spent hours and hours after school and on weekends trying different recipes. Thankfully, everyone in my family had a sweet tooth, because they were my earliest taste testers. Now this is a family and friend favorite. I serve it every year for Thanksgiving and often bring it to holiday potluck parties.

INGREDIENTS

2 pieces of semisweet chocolate baking bar, melted
(I use Ghirardelli or Baker's brand)
3 eggs at room temperature
½ cup sugar
½ cup brown sugar
2½ tablespoons butter, melted
1 cup dark corn syrup
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 cup pecans, roughly chopped
¾ cup semisweet chocolate chips, divided
1 prepared pie crust, refrigerated or frozen

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350°F. Melt baking bar pieces. Beat the eggs in a large bowl until smooth. To the eggs, stir in the sugars, melted butter (the butter should not be too hot), corn syrup, vanilla, and melted chocolate baking bar. Stir until smooth. Add the chopped pecans.

Very lightly grease a deep-dish 9-inch pie pan and place on a cookie sheet to make it easier to slide into the oven. Fit the pie crust in the pan and fold or flute the edges. Sprinkle ½ a cup of chocolate chips across the bottom of the pie crust. Pour the eggs, corn syrup, and pecan mixture into the prepared pie crust. Use the leftover ¼ cup of chocolate chips to line the pie crust edge (about ¼ inch apart), pressing the chips into the crust so they hold. You might need a few more chips to make it all the way around.

Bake in the center of your oven for about 1 hour. When done, the pie should look set. Test for doneness by gently pressing on the center of the pie. It should spring back. Let cool on a rack for several hours, then store in the refrigerator. Serve with a dollop of whipped cream or à la mode with a scoop of vanilla or vanilla chocolate chip ice cream. Enjoy!

MOM'S STRAIGHT FROM THE SHTETL LATKES

When I was growing up, latkes marked many holiday celebrations, not just Hanukah. In *The Lost Baker of Vienna*, Chana started out baking by first helping her father with simple tasks. My mother often employed my help with her latkes, whether it was grating potatoes or flipping latkes in the frying pan. As a newlywed, I wanted my husband and I to celebrate our first Hanukah together with latkes. My mother was my go-to for recipes, because this was back before Google existed and Mom was my recipe search engine.

"Get a pen and paper," Mom said when I called for her latke recipe.

She dictated quickly: 5 to 6 large potatoes; 3 eggs; 2 to 3 tablespoons of flour, salt, and sugar. I tried to pin down the amounts of salt and sugar. Her answer of a *bissel* wasn't illuminating, but she added, "No onion, cook on a low flame, and add flour if the mixture is too loose."

My mother had a simple approach to food. Her cooking used few ingredients, she fried practically everything, and her kitchen style always included a thin cotton cobbler apron, patterned with flowers.

All these years later, her latke recipe is a family favorite and a part of her that has endured. Confession: I always add onion and say a mea culpa to my mother when I do, though I needn't. In her later years, she called me a *balabusta*—a good homemaker—her highest compliment.

INGREDIENTS

6 medium russet potatoes, peeled and grated (I usually do this by hand)
½ of 1 small onion, grated
3 eggs
3 tablespoons flour (if consistency is still too runny, add another tablespoon or two)
1 tablespoon of sugar
1½ teaspoon of salt
¼ cup vegetable oil or extra virgin olive oil (more if needed)

DIRECTIONS

Mix first six ingredients together. Heat oil over medium-high in a large skillet. Drop ¼ of a cup of the potato mixture in the hot oil, and repeat until the pan is full but the latkes aren't touching. Brown on both sides and lay on paper towels to drain the oil. Add more oil to the skillet if needed. Once done frying the latkes, serve immediately with your choice of topping. My family is partial to applesauce and sour cream.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As a book club member, I often look forward to our group's meal as much as the lively discussion surrounding our monthly book selection. For book clubs reading *The Lost Baker of Vienna*, I offer this suggested menu to enhance your gathering and expand your knowledge of Austrian food. My childhood memories, research, and two recent trips to Austria inspired this menu. I also sampled many of the region's delicious desserts, all in the name of research, of course.

Sharon loved exploring Vienna on her two research trips, one in summer 2018 and the other in 2024 during the winter.

WISHING YOU *GUTEN APPETIT*!

· SHARON'S BOOK CLUB MENU ·

DRINKS

Apricot spritz · White wine

APPETIZER

Cheese and meat board, including *Liptauer* spread, crackers, crostini · Austrian cheeses like *Bergkäse* (a semihard mountain cheese), sliced prosciutto, dried apricots, and crudité · Big soft pretzels

ENTREE

Chicken Weiner schnitzel · *Erdäpfelsalat*

DESSERT

All-season apricot *Marillenkuchen* (included in recipe guide) · *Apfelstrudel*

SHARON'S MENU NOTES

DRINKS

I chose an apricot spritz because Austria's Wachau Valley produces apricots in abundance. The valley, specifically the village of Dürnstein, features prominently in *The Lost Baker of Vienna*.

If opting for wine, I suggest a Grüner Veltliner, an Austrian white wine, often flavored with bright citrus and herbs.

APPETIZER

I chose Liptauer spread because it's a traditional Austrian cheese spread; one can slather it on bread or use it as a dip. The addition of prosciutto springs from my 2024 trip to Austria and dinner at Trattoria Toscana La No where the server carved the prosciutto appetizer table side. It was so fresh and melted in my mouth.

A field of apricot trees in February in the Wachau Valley

Prosciutto appetizer and prosciutto being carved at Trattoria Toscana La No

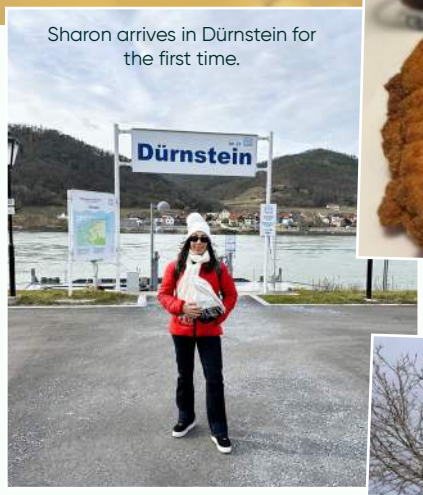
ENTREE

Weiner schnitzel is a staple in Austria, though many believe it likely originated in Milan, Italy, under the name *cotoletta alla Milanese*. The mid-nineteenth century saw the dish's introduction to Austria. I visited the Wachau Valley in 2024—arriving in Dürnstein for the first time—and I ate lunch at a lovely restaurant in Melk. There, I enjoyed a version of schnitzel using chicken. The condiment accompanying the dish was fresh cranberry sauce. It was a winner, and so my menu suggests using chicken in this recipe.

Potatoes are a common side dish in Austria, and often served as potato salad under the name *Erdäpfelsalat*. Instead of the typical US version using mayonnaise, *Erdäpfelsalat* calls for a vinegar-and-oil-based dressing.

DESSERT

Marillenkuchen appears in *The Lost Baker of Vienna* and uses apricots. It is a yummy, yet simple, end to the meal, not overly sweet. *Apfelstrudel* is an Austrian staple, though keep in mind if you're making it at home, the dough is labor-intensive to prepare, as I've described in the novel. Making it from scratch would likely call for an extra pair of hands in the prep.



Sharon arrives in Dürnstein for the first time.

Lunch in Melk duringa Sharon's tour of the Wachau Valley

A path leading to the village of Dürnstein.

Sharon enjoyed a slice of *apfelstrudel* at the Sacher Hotel in Vienna.

A slice of Sharon's homemade *Marillenkuchen*.

Sharon and her husband Warren attend a *Mozartkugel* making class in Vienna.

Sharon makes some candy.

The *Mozartkugel* ingredients

The finished candies were messy but delicious!

SHARON'S EXTRA NOTE

On my second trip to Austria, I had planned to attend an *apfelstrudel* making demonstration, but the bakery turned out to be closed for renovations. Instead, I took a *mozartkugel*-making class. *Mozartkugel* (also known as Mozart balls) are small, round candy with a pistachio, marzipan, and nougat center coated in chocolate. Mozart was born in Salzburg and this candy bearing his name is widely sold in Vienna. Meanwhile, the *apfelstrudel* demonstration tops my to-do list for the next time I visit Vienna!