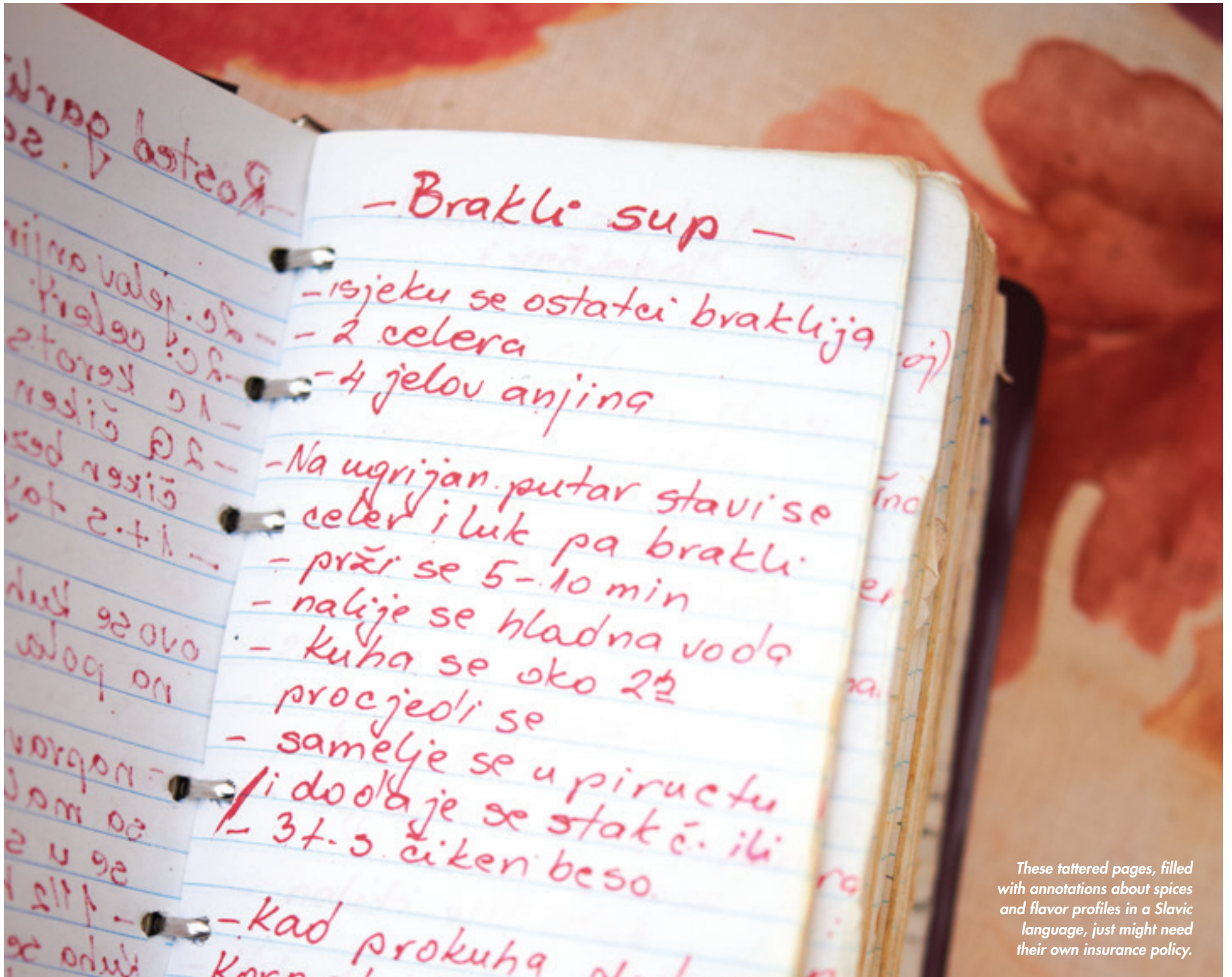


Notes From Home

How one woman's courage led her to a life in food



BY JULIE COHEN | PHOTOS BY GREG RANNELLS



These tattered pages, filled with annotations about spices and flavor profiles in a Slavic language, just might need their own insurance policy.

Fatima Kuzelj eyed her workstation and took a deep breath. With the focus of a dancer moving her toe to the sound of that first note, she dove into a giant metal bowl of mushrooms with an eye on the clock. In the time it took her to inquire about a coworker's new grandchild, she had finished slicing the mushrooms and was trotting to a seven-foot-tall wire-shelving unit. She pulled two paint-can-sized tubs of seasoning down from the Brodingtonian spice rack and carried them back to her station where she fingered salt, Italian seasoning and oil through the slivered stems, spreading them on a tray that she lifted onto her shoulder and carried to the oven. The next bowl held five pounds of artichokes. As she seasoned and spread them on another tray, her forearms flexed, hinting at what could become a mean backhand if given a different arena. Replacing the mushrooms for the 'chokes in the oven, she headed back to her station, disappearing momentarily and returning with another metal bowl filled with bell peppers. She rinsed them, pulled out their ribs and seeds, and started slicing, her knife moving quickly and gracefully, like a conductor's baton during an allegro movement. Halfway through the bowl, she paused for the first time in what felt like hours but had only been the length of two pop songs blaring from Butler's Pantry's kitchen radio. She swished her fingers through the mound of sliced peppers, mixing the yellows with the reds and greens. Smiling for just a split second, she admired her work before heading back to the spice rack.

Kuzelj (pronounced *coo-zhel*) made her choreographed dance around the hot, busy kitchen appear effortless, but her first twirl in an industrial kitchen wasn't quite so graceful. When Patty Long Catering Co. hired her 19 years ago, she had never stood before a stove other than her own. "When I see that whole wall of seasoning, I say, 'Whoa. I will never remember that,'" Kuzelj recalled. Back in her native Bosnia, seasonings were minimal: "basically onion, garlic, salt, pepper and that special Vegeta." So she tucked a small

notebook and pen into the pocket of her apron and began scribbling English to Bosnian whenever she learned a spice's job.

Soon, she knew that paprika could be used for flavor, for color or as garnish; that thyme's herbal notes complemented tomato-based dishes. She was a quick learner. She had to be. After all, she was never *supposed* to create recipes for parties and galas. "We hired her to clean, iron and do housework," recalled Greg Ziegenfuss, now executive chef for Butler's Pantry Catering, Café Madeleine and Bixby's. One day when work got busy, Ziegenfuss called Kuzelj into the kitchen. "He wanted me to peel a carrot, an onion, just to help for one moment," she remembered. "He asked me if I could do what he did, to ...," she paused, searching for the right word; "to garnish." After work that day, Ziegenfuss marched out to the car waiting to pick Kuzelj up. He told her 14-year-old son that his mother was no longer a cleaning lady; she was going to be a chef. He asked the boy to explain that to his mother because, well, he couldn't.

"I couldn't speak even one word [of English]," Kuzelj recalled, smiling. "I don't know how I understood when he asked me to do what he did. But I did it fast."

When Kuzelj first arrived in the U.S., she knew she needed to find work. "It doesn't matter what I do," she remembered telling herself. "I can learn. I just don't want to sit down and wait for someone to give me something. I don't like that." She'd only been in The States for 45 days when Ziegenfuss brought her on in 1993. "When they hired me for cleaning, I say, OK that is job. ... My life totally changed."

But a career change was mere trifle compared to the changes Kuzelj had endured over the last year. Following the fall of communism in Europe, Bosnia-Herzegovina – made up of Muslim Bosniaks, Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs – declared independence from the former Yugoslavia. Some Bosnian Serb nationalists wished to stay

with Serb-dominated Yugoslavia, however. Backed and armed by Serbia, they embarked on an ethnic cleansing campaign across the Bosnia-Herzegovina countryside in 1992. Calling the war complex is an understatement, but its result was horrifically straightforward: Neighbors began killing neighbors seemingly overnight, as the three ethnic groups fought a civil war that would last almost four years and claim more than 100,000 lives.

In Prijedor, a city in the northwestern corner of the country, Kuzelj and her family were forced to wear white armbands and fly white flags to distinguish themselves as Bosniaks. One evening after dinner, Kuzelj's husband left to share a cigarette with friends. "He never came home," she said softly. Both Kuzelj's husband and brother had been taken to a Serb-run prison camp. "I not even know my husband was alive." With her office job long gone and the fate of her husband uncertain, Kuzelj had few options. "Stay in house and wait for someone to come kill you," she stated matter-of-factly; her voice quiet, her tone now sharply blunt.

Almost a year later, Kuzelj's phone rang. "I get call from Red Cross that there was someone to talk to me. Then my husband get on phone." She smiled, wistfully. Her husband, she was told, was resettled in St. Louis with a handful of other Bosnian refugees. When Kuzelj's paperwork arrived, she and her children could join him.

Two and a half months had passed when a Serb soldier walked into Kuzelj's home and claimed it as his own. He promised Kuzelj that, when he returned in two weeks, he would kill her children if so much as a spoon was missing from his new house. With Serbs patrolling the streets and nowhere for them to go, the only thing Kuzelj and her family could do was wait, hoping the necessary papers arrived before the soldier. But they didn't. When Kuzelj finally had the right papers in hand, which arrived right after the soldier, she followed her children out her front door; each child clutching a small plastic bag of clothes, the only



Fatima Kuzelj with her son, Dr. Denis Kuzelj. When he was 14, Denis — with only minimal knowledge of the English language — helped his family navigate an international journey to St. Louis. Once there, it was his job to translate the message that would change his mother's life.

This tomato salad was the first dish Fatima Kuzelj brought into the American kitchen from her native Bosnia nearly 20 years ago. These days, hundreds of St. Louisans flock to her salads each week for Sunday brunch at The Palm House.



things the soldier would allow. As Kuzelj walked out, she tossed her house key in the garbage, knowing she would never get to use it again. But the hardest part was leaving her mother, who, still hoping for news of her missing son, couldn't bring herself to leave. As we sat on a couch inside Kuzelj's South City home, Kuzelj closed her eyes and drifted back to that day. Now, with the knowledge that her brother had been killed in a prison camp, she whispered her mother's words: "Don't think about me. Save your kids."

Eleven packed buses were allowed out of Prijedor that day. Every time the buses stopped en route to the border between Bosnia and Croatia, Serbian soldiers pulled someone off. "They kill and they come back on with a bloody knife, asking who was next," she recalled, shuddering at the memory. Eventually, Kuzelj and her children made it to a friend's home in Zagreb, Croatia, where they stayed for three months.

Once their flights were secured, Kuzelj and her children stepped onto a plane for the very first time. After flying from Croatia to Germany to New York, Kuzelj, with \$5 in her pocket and no luggage to claim, walked through Lambert-St. Louis International Airport and saw her husband waiting. It had been a long year.

Once she was promoted to the Patty Long kitchen, Kuzelj knew she had one more hurdle to overcome if she were to succeed: She needed to learn English. Most people would buy books or take classes. But Kuzelj is more of a visual learner. "I just watch everything. I listen to how people talk and try to remember." She paused. "You know what I tell myself always? I can. I have to. I want."

Early one summer morning in the Butler's Pantry break room, Kuzelj's coworkers arrived one by one. The gardener. The interns. The president of the company. They all greeted Kuzelj warmly with an imperceptible bow of their heads. She has earned respect in the ranks of the kitchen, a place renowned for hard-knocks learning and little patience. Yet when it comes to titles, she refuses. "I am just employee," she said, looking me square in the eye, challenging me to disagree. "And I try and do best. When I do good job and make people happy, title doesn't mean [anything] for me."

But to Ziegenfuss, Kuzelj is his right hand. "She's very good at seeing the vision," he explained. "If I say, here's what I'd like to do, it always looks better than what I had envisioned." When Ziegenfuss moved from Patty Long Catering to Butler's Pantry 11 years ago, he brought Kuzelj with him. "She is still such a sponge for knowledge.

Ofentimes, I'll ask her something I might have taught her 15 years ago, and she will then show me how to do it."

She's also the owner of one very prized possession: Her notebook, the same one she has carried for 19 years that is now the collective consciousness of both Patty Long and Butler's Pantry. When Kuzelj's car was stolen several years ago, Ziegenfuss – after affirming that Kuzelj wasn't harmed – had just one question for her: "But did they take your notebook?"

On Sunday mornings, Kuzelj can be found in the kitchen at Café Madeleine, where she runs brunch in the oldest standing greenhouse west of the Mississippi. Nestled in Tower Grove Park, Sunday brunch in The Palm House rouses an ambiance of special. And as soon as I stepped into the room, it was clear why. It was also clear that those mushrooms and artichokes and rainbow of peppers she'd been slicing weren't being baked down into a broth and puréed, or roasted to sit aside a juicy pork shoulder. They were being made into a salad – the kind Kuzelj has been making every week for devoted brunch-goers for the past 10 years. Salad was the first dish Kuzelj brought into the American kitchen – a simple combination of ripe tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, crisp cucumbers, slivers of piquant red onion, and a little salt, pepper, olive oil and white vinegar. Big, bright, colorful, it was an ode to the talent Kuzelj has for capturing the flavors and colors of the season. "She understands," said Ziegenfuss, who quickly put her in charge of setup and display at the weekly brunches. "She has a real good feel for mixing colors, textures – figuring out orchestrations, just making things pop."

And pop they did. Under The Palm House's arched glass ceiling and marble pillars, sleepy-eyed diners completely bypassed the cakes and waffles and casseroles and meats to swarm Kuzelj's salads. From the spicy (bok choy, snow peas and mushrooms) to the sweet (broccoli, ruby red cherries, wild rice, crisp apples and carrots) to the refreshing (cubes of juicy red and yellow watermelon, slivers of cucumber and a dusting of fresh mint), every dish – nine in total – sparkled both in appearance and flavor. Julia Child once famously claimed that the test of a good chef was a perfectly roasted chicken; but here, Kuzelj makes a strong case for the measure of a perfect salad. No vegetable was overcooked, no green overdressed.

During the week, Kuzelj's responsibilities are hardly as precise. "Every day is different," she explained, just the way she'd hoped it would be nearly two decades earlier. When I met up with her again, in the span of just a few minutes, she rolled and cut sushi, delicately plucked purple flowers from a bouquet and instructed a CIA

intern on the proper way to garnish. "Greg put [them] next to me and say, 'show.' It make me kind of proud." But learning from Kuzelj requires practice, for she teaches the same way she learned: through observation. "All my recipes are in here," she said, gesturing to her head. "I never measure. What I make, it good. I look with my eyes. I say, honey, you just do everything. I do one thing for you and I say, you just follow that. If you don't know, you just tell me; I show again."

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Kuzelj is entrusted to do just about anything in the kitchen at Butler's Pantry, but she draws the line at catering a Bosnian wedding. "No, no, there are too many foods!" she exclaimed. "American weddings, easy ... chicken, rice, veggies ... that can't be dinner for Bosnian wedding. Bosnian weddings, there are big buffets, so many different foods – veal, beef, chicken, lamb ... it is tradition. It is just one time in life you marry," she laughed. "OK, for some, few times."

"But for me, one time," she said, recalling the man she traveled here for all those years ago. When her husband passed seven years ago, they had spent more than three decades together. And while she has catered hundreds if not thousands of weddings during that time, when it was her time to say her vows, she eloped. And she encouraged her daughter to do the same. "It's for yourself," she said. "Not for people. Good barbecue, good friends; that is for me."

Kuzelj doesn't visit Bosnia anymore. "My family is here: my kids, my granddaughter and Butler's Pantry. Believe me," she reiterated. "If you love your job, you're going to love all around you." Three years ago, she returned to Bosnia to bury her mother. On the flight back, she was sure the trip would be her last. "When I fly over the Arch, I say, 'Thanks God, I'm home.'" 