

Amber & Rye: A Baltic Food Journey

Zuza Zak

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Polish food authority Zuza Zak introduces the Baltic states in *Amber & Rye*, a stunning account of her summer tour of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Her creative versions of traditional recipes and novel use of beloved local ingredients come alongside travel shots and profiles of Baltic cities.

Zak is a personable, knowledgeable storyteller who uses literary quotes and summaries of history and oppressive occupations to enliven her impressions of the Baltic states' new waves of restaurateurs, market vendors, and artisanal food growers and producers. She introduces a culture that balances pride and heritage with experimentation, celebrating "hard-won freedom and individuality." Iconic dishes like kvass, Estonia's fermented bread beverage, are present, and Zak finds novel ways to use local ingredients like sea buckthorn berries, birch syrup, and Latvian green cheese. The book suggests substitutions for unusual items, too, alongside lists of suppliers for those seeking the most authentic tastes.

In the Baltic states, people love sour and earthy flavors. These are present in recipes throughout, and are offset by desserts and baked goods that satisfy regional sweet teeth. A chapter on pickles and jams, which are updated with intriguing ferments, honors preserving traditions, and vegan, vegetarian, and pescatarian recipes prevail. Zak lightens and brightens many traditional dishes with twists, utilizing vibrant herbs, edible flowers, vegetables, and fruits.

Folk art motifs reinforce the book's fresh, colorful vibe, as do its insightful descriptions of visited sites: Zak references Tartu's laid-back personality and pop-up home cafés, the "marzipan-colored" architecture of Tallinn, and the Art Nouveau chicness of Riga streetscapes, where residents are "open and smart, with a vein of wry wit."

Amber and Rye is a stylish introduction to Baltic foods and culture that accents the region's evolving contemporary scenes.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (September / October 2021)

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