**Clarion Review**

Cooking

**Dining By the Stars: An Astrology Cookbook**
Maija Dambis Collins
978-1-4259-6456-6
Four Stars (out of Five)

Ambitious and prize-winning chefs from the finer eateries of Latvia's capitol city Riga present an appealing array of tradition-based and international cuisine framed by Collins' text detailing astrological concepts. The Baltic republic has traits of an old country but is also new: released from Soviet occupation in 1991 and admitted to the European Union in 2004. Long periods of rule by Germany and Sweden left their own culinary stamps.

Maija Dambis Collins was born Latvian and immigrated to the United States during childhood. She is now retired from teaching at-risk youth in New York state. Her memoir is entitled *Sveika America A Displaced Person Remembers*. Recent visits home sparked this new project. Befriending Chef Eriks Dreibants led to a cooperative effort by five creative foodsmiths from four establishments.

Astrology serves as an organizing device beginning with Aries and moving through the year. Each chapter includes a recipe for a breakfast a lunch a romantic dinner for two and other occasions. Selected dishes follow seasonal logic and strive for harmony with sign characteristics. The relative influence of the planet Venus and the moon on eating and relationships is discussed. "Maintain a balance of both not excluding the matron or the romantic…" A website tie-in gives feedback based on readers' specific birthdays.

The Tilly's Test Kitchen personnel (the reviewer and family) selected three recipes to prove out: Traditional Latvian Platmaize Bread with Marinated Mushrooms Basil and Caraway Cheese; Pineapple Carpaccio with Lemon Sorbet; and lastly Thin Pancakes with Dried Fruit and Honey. While mixing ingredients for Kaspars Jansons' Platmaize (Aries menu) a printed error in water quantity nearly stopped the show but the cook successfully winged that step. The dish's herbal content counters the richness of the cheese and bacon. Pancakes and the sorbet (Leo menu) both from Kalku Varti's Executive Chef Eriks Driebants worked out as designed. The former were thin and capable of holding a tight roll without cracking. All test dishes were

flavorful with positive visual aesthetics and were enjoyed by a representative child as well.

The photos of food by Maris Zemgalietis show such tasteful composition choices that readers will wish there were a few more. *Dining by the Stars'* recipes were written in the Latvian and translated into English. It is difficult to speculate on whether the mistake we found in one recipe is an isolated anomaly or if other such flaws were overlooked. The author (a Scorpio) has been a student of the zodiac since the 1960s. The purpose of the astrological angle is to help eaters get in tune with the cosmos but it can also be appreciated as unserious fun. The impression of Riga a San Francisco-size city reshaping its culture indicates a growing openness. Those who travel to the eastern edge of Europe should find satisfying fare.

*Todd Mercer*