

FOOD & WINE

FOR THE LOVE OF STRUDEL AND TIMES GONE BY

BY MARCIA GAGLIARDI

*It's a late Friday afternoon, and I'm enjoying coffee with a friend at 20th Century Cafe in Hayes Valley, introducing her to her first slice of honey cake. A dapper guitarist is playing vintage jazz, and in the back, an enchanting and almost unbelievable pastry dance is happening. The cafe's chef-owner, **Michelle Polzine**, is flitting around an elevated table (large enough to seat six), which is covered with a slick layer of golden dough, as big as the tablecloth underneath it. She's patting it, smoothing it, and then gently pulling and stretching the edges. She's fretting over it, caressing it, peering over her horn-rimmed glasses resting on her nose, her full attention fixed upon this massive sheet of dough. I ask, "What are you making, Michelle?" She excitedly warbles back: "The strudel!"*

Polzine has her trademark red hair up in elegant braids, a beautiful contrast against her deep-purple 1940s dress, half-covered with a vintage floral apron tied around her waist, and a tea towel stashed over the back ties. Everyone in the cafe is transfixed, watching her dough-dance, a master at work. With the music playing, I almost forget what year it is, until I look at the tattoos on her arms and am reminded we're in modern times. It's easy to forget in 20th Century Cafe, which is the idea. It's a place where recipes that remind you of your grandmother are celebrated and kept alive, along with her china, sterling silver creamers, and cake forks.

Polzine was a celebrated pastry chef at Range in the Mission for seven years, known for her inspired use of seasonal fruits. She took a trip to Eastern Europe, tracking down the coffeehouses mentioned in the book by **Rick Rodgers**, *Kaffeehaus: Exquisite Desserts from the Classic Cafes of Vienna, Budapest, and Prague*. Those elegant cafes ended up providing inspiration for her business — she didn't know she could have her own place where pastry is the star and savory dishes are secondary.

At Vienna's famed Demel, she remembers the glass pastry room with a strudel table, something she had never seen before. She thought to herself, "People need to see this!" And in Budapest, she couldn't believe there was a shop solely dedicated to strudel. When she returned, she made strudel at Range, putting three high bar tables together and covering them with a tablecloth. For 20th Century Cafe, she had a custom marble-topped table made by Ohio Design, with a crank so she can raise and lower it.

She explains that so many baked goods are made by machine, like the laminators for croissants, but for strudel, it's all about being made by hand. She says people can scoff

at the \$7.50 price tag, but when they see the amount of labor that goes into it, they change their tune. Polzine adds, "I love doing hand-made things that are silly and don't make any sense for a business." The dough ends up thin and translucent: there can be upward of 20 to 30 crackly layers after it's all folded upon itself. The seasonal fillings change from apple to poached quince, rhubarb, or peaches.

The strudel is her magnum opus, something she's been perfecting the past nine years — she says there's always something that can be tweaked, which you only realize by doing something all the time. She even has some trademark moves that are integral to her process. There's the "Patented Polzine Gravity Stretch," her solution to get the middle of the dough to stretch, and the "Jackson Pollock Strudel Bongos," which is when she's flinging butter like crazy and patting it all over the dough, ideally to live music. She says, "When the music is playing, it fills my heart. It transports me. Really, it's there for ME!"

The dough can fail, which keeps her engaged while making it. You have to concentrate: there can be a fatal tear, and if you don't work quickly, it can dry out. Or the strudel can catastrophically tumble to the floor, like a six-foot burrito — it has happened twice (and made her cry once), and simply cannot happen again.

While the honey cake gets all the attention (type #20thcenturycafe on Instagram and it's all you see), the strudel is the real star. When regulars hear there's strudel in the oven, they'll often claim it all before it's even put on the counter.

You can hope to catch the strudel show on Friday afternoons, when **Rob Reich** plays from 2 to 5 p.m., or on Saturday afternoons with **Nick Rossi**, starting at 3 p.m. **NHG**



Michelle Polzine's Instagrammable honey cake (left) has been dubbed a destination dessert. But another gem at 20th Century Cafe is her labor-intensive, worth-the-wait strudel, pictured in process below.





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