

FOOD AND DRINK

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Summer sojourn serves up a heaping helping of Lithuania

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Authentic, cooked-from-scratch food not only keeps members of America's various ethnic groups close, but also serves to bridge the different cultures.

Consider Merrimack resident Oonagh Williams, a native of England, with a Welsh-born husband. A well-traveled culinary expert, Williams is currently playing a huge role in helping a local ethnic community far different from hers remain cohesive – through cooking and eating.

Indeed, Nashua's Lithuanian population was in danger of fragmenting after its church and social center, St. Casimir Church, held its final services in mid-September 2002, a victim of declining membership and the nationwide shortage of Catholic priests. But Williams, who has taught Lithuanian cooking classes in Nashua for five years, knew that further study of the language and native Lithuanian cooking could help the local community stay connected to its roots.

Over the summer, Williams got the chance to study both when the Nashua Public Library's Zylonis Lithuanian Heritage Trust fund, which had sponsored her cooking classes, sent her to the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius to learn the language and augment her vast knowledge of cooking.

Named in honor of Hudson farmer Charles Zylonis, who emigrated from Lithuania, the fund promotes Lithuanian culture and education to keep the heritage alive in the area.

Besides her Nashua Public Library classes, Williams, who operates Royal Temptations catering out of her home, teaches adult evening classes called "International Cooking Made Easy" at Merrimack High School, hosts a cooking show on Merrimack's local cable Channel 22, and has been an occasional guest on WMUR-TV's "Cooks Corner."

Her next WMUR appearance will be Wednesday, Sept. 28, during the noontime news show. Her specialty that day? "I'll make a chicken dish with shrimp, mango and grapes – which I learned and made in Lithuania," she said.

Upon arriving in Vilnius, Williams said she was instantly impressed. "There are more churches there than I've ever seen in one city . . . many of the buildings there are so startlingly beautiful," she said.

And another discovery: "Lithuania is not just potatoes and cabbage like a lot of people think."

Williams kept an extensive electronic diary while abroad, often e-mailing some of the passages home.

One of her earliest entries described the trip and resulting jet lag: "Getting here, we went more than 30 hours without sleep. I find it quite difficult with the time difference to sleep, plus it is still broad daylight at 10 p.m. and very warm."

Another reports her findings from some of the road trips she and other students made in search of native foods. "One day we drove to Trakai (a small settlement about 28 kilometers west of Vilnius) where they make a small turnover similar to an English Cornish pastry; it's pork and onions in pastry called a kibinai. We had that for lunch with beer.

"Beer being mentioned will be a constant, since we are working our way through the beers," she wrote.

"Finally got back to Vilnius and went to yet another pub where I had crepes with cooked chickens served with sour cream and a different beer. I am slowly working my way through

the Lithuanian menus. I have had two different types of potato pancakes, one filled with ground pork and the other served with smoked salmon. The zepelinai I had didn't compare with the ones at the Lithuania Club in Boston. So I have to work on those," she wrote.

In her local cooking classes, Williams said, it's quite common for people of Lithuanian descent to recognize her dishes. "Many things I cook are dishes that go back to peoples' mothers and grandmothers in the old country . . . they didn't use recipes, per se, because things were rarely written down back then."

Jogging her students' memories is fun for her. "What I find particularly pleasing is that at least half of the participants are of Lithuanian descent and confirm that the dishes bring back memories," she said.

"I get great pleasure in hearing people in the class delightedly reminiscing over a recipe that I taught, bringing back memories of their mother or grandmother cooking the same thing."

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Staff photo by Peter Dicampo

Oonagh Williams cooks a Lithuanian dish of pancakes and salmon in her home in Merrimack.