

# A Passion for Precision

Writer Susan Swenson Cooks Up a Word Perfect Feast

by Carol Kino

Anyone who frequents Pierogi 2000, the granddaddy of Williamsburg's artist-run galleries, has probably experienced Susan Swenson's way with hospitality and food. After each opening, she and her husband Joe Amrhein, who originally started Pierogi in his tiny studio in 1994, usually hold some sort of family-style celebration — like a casual dinner for 50 or 100 or so — in their newly renovated loft upstairs.

The tradition began two years ago, when they christened the new gallery with a massive, everyone's-invited, black tie bash in what was then raw space. A few months later, in the newly renovated loft, they hosted their own wedding feast. Susan amazed all her friends by preparing the Mexican-inspired meal herself, with minimal assistance — just days after she'd returned from her honeymoon and hours after the dishwasher and 6-burner industrial stove were installed.

In addition to such domestic adventures, Susan has more than a few other things going on. As well as editing her three-year-old literary and arts biannual, Pierogi Press, she is pursuing an MFA in poetry at Bennington College, and also works as a color consultant and knitwear designer for Federated, the company that owns Bloomingdale's and Macy's. Yet the fascinating thing about her, I've always found, is that what you think you see at first isn't at all what you finally get.

Initially, she comes off as sweet, self-effacing, and rather demure. But start her going on a subject she feels strongly about — like the pros and cons of last fall's "Elsewhere" gallery festival — and the word that springs to mind is "intense." Once we began making plans for our dinner together, everything I'd ever known about her before seemed to ratchet up several levels: at times, I felt I'd stepped into the path of a particularly well-focused tornado.

The moment we set a date for the meal, she began improvising her menu. It would be a "longing for spring" dinner that would feature salmon ceviche and roast butterflied leg of lamb stuffed with mint and pistachio paste. (She calls these her "signature" dishes because they're among the few she's made more than once.) Right after that, she began sending me long, revealing e-mails in which she delineated and analyzed her approach to food.

"I have a tendency to never really do the same thing twice," she wrote. "I always like to experiment and try something different." To make a dish, she researches it in several cookbooks to get a line on its underlying technical principles. "I rarely follow a recipe per se as I seem to be too stubborn to just do what someone else says." Instead, she nips and tucks until she's tailored the dish to fit her own highly individualized tastes. "I guess that's my credo for everything; nothing quite right the way it is, so must do my own." (It was a similar urge that propelled her to start designing and making her own clothes in fifth grade and, later, to earn associate's degree in apparel design at FIT)

This and more (including Susan Swenson's recipes) online at [www.wburg.com](http://www.wburg.com).

Certainly, Susan doesn't cook because she needs something else to do. The weekend of our dinner, she was finishing up her monthly Bennington writing assignment and working on a text collage – a creative catalog essay – for "Out Of Context," a group show at Cal State Fullerton, curated by Sue Joyce, that will focus on artists whose work is strongly influenced by literature and language. She was also helping out downstairs at Pierogi and making plans for the Stockholm Art Fair, where, for the first time, she would install and run the gallery booth by herself. (Joe stayed behind in Brooklyn to work on his own solo show of text-based work, at Roebing Hall through April 10).

In fact, Susan was so busy that she didn't even venture into Manhattan to shop for food till early afternoon on the day we were to dine. But by 7:30 p.m., when I arrived with my notebook, lamb, golden beets, and onions were fragrantly roasting in the oven and she was calmly perusing her dinner notes.

It seemed that her initial plans, written in black pen, had given way to a wealth of pencilled-in ideas. ("I have this real problem when I shop," she often says, "because it's like I want to get everything.") At Chelsea Market, she'd been transfixed by pale green broccoflower – so out went peas with lemon and thyme and in came a vegetable mash, which she enhanced with celery root and dried porcini mushrooms. For dessert, she'd originally planned a key lime pie with a graham cracker crust; but then she was seduced by Meyer lemons – the sweet golden variety that's a staple of California cuisine.

"I have a tendency to suddenly forget major ingredients if guests are around while I'm preparing something," she explained. Normally, the notes are gone by the time the guests arrive. But as I looked them over, I couldn't help thinking that it seemed as though the neatly inked Dinner Party as Platonic Ideal had given way to the more fascinating flux of real life. (Weirdly, they also reminded me of instructions for the projects Joe occasionally fabricates for conceptual artists like Lawrence Weiner and Lothar Baumgarten – or even his own text-based work.)

The guests arrived, and Susan plied them with caperberries, sweet green olives, and Humboldt Fog – a delicious California goat cheese layered with pale gray ash. Then she offered champagne. "I almost wasn't going to have it because it seems so pretentious," she hurriedly explained, "but I needed a white wine for the first course." Everyone began oohing and aahing, and we sat down to the ceviche. Though most ceviche recipes call for marinating raw mackerel in lime juice, Susan prefers to use salmon. "I just thought about what sorts of fish I like raw," she told me later. "And I thought it would be a pretty color."

Curiously, as a child growing up in New Jersey, food didn't interest Susan at all. "I was an extremely picky eater. I would only eat peanut butter and jelly or grilled cheese sandwiches." Later, she used to amuse her friends at FIT by putting tortellini on to cook and then boiling it dry, while she became absorbed in work. At the grocery store, "I used to walk up and down every aisle, and I used to think there's nothing there." Once she tried to make pancakes, doggedly following the recipe in a cookbook, and was chagrined to end up with something resembling mashed potatoes. "I thought, 'I hate this! It's a waste of time!'"

Her tastes began to change, however, with her increasing exposure to exotic foods, courtesy of regular business trips to textile and design centers like Paris, London, Hong Kong, and Florence. Concurrently, many of her friends had become interested in cooking. One served as a sous-chef for Jean-Georges Vongerichten, before he opened Vong, and an old boyfriend supported his design career by working at Dean and De Luca.

But Susan didn't start cooking herself until about ten or eleven years ago, when she decided to dispel her migraines by stripping sugar and junk food from her diet.

The first dish she carried off successfully was risotto. "I read about what the technique of cooking it was, and I looked at recipes, but then I made up my own." Rather than sticking to the classic mixture of reggiano and arborio rice, she started experimenting with more off-the-wall combinations, adding things like sweet potato and goat cheese. "That was the first time I cooked something successfully, because I understood what the idea of it was instead of just trying to blindly follow a recipe."

After she met Joe at an opening almost 6 years ago, one of the first things they did together was try out recipes for cachapas – an omelet-like dish made of baked corn and sweet white cheese that he'd become obsessed with on a trip to Venezuela. "He would describe it and I would try to duplicate it." More recently, they've experimented with key lime pie: once, they concocted three different miniature tarts and photographed – and tasted – the results.

Today, Susan says, "I like to cook on a regular basis. I cook most days for Joe and me. I never use a recipe, and I make things really quickly. It's sort of the same thing – I'll just do something different each time. I also really like the social aspect of having a dinner and making something for people. That's one of the things that spurs me on."

She also likes to imagine how different ingredients will taste together – and to invent. Throughout the meal, I found myself realizing what a flagrantly improvisational cook she really is. Not only does she create her own recipes, she sometimes doesn't even dream them up till she's already started cooking. "I think that sometimes I cook like I do other things, like a stream of consciousness," she told me once. "One thing sort of leads to another."

Certainly, that's how her roast lamb, which turned out to be meltingly rich and tender, came to be. She developed it a few years ago, after she happened across a quite different recipe in a Jean-Georges Vongerichten cookbook, for boneless lamb with a mushroom crust. This discovery unleashed an experimental frenzy that led her to cook many mushroom-crusting things. One day, she found herself spreading a butterflied leg of lamb with a pistachio and mint paste and sticking it under the broiler. "I don't know where exactly I got the idea, I think I just wanted to crust the surface with nuts." Then she and artist Bruce Pearson, her occasional cooking partner, decided to make a lamb roast that was stuffed with nuts and mushrooms and crusted with dried mushrooms. "It looked like a big dirt ball." Soon after, she decided to combine all these ideas by rolling up her pistachio-basted lamb, and roasting it as well. (To acquire her stuffing, rolling, and trussing technique, she buttonholed a butcher at

Jefferson Market, the old Greenwich Village grocery store, and got him to divulge his secrets.)

During our meal, I realized that Susan does have a tendency to become discombobulated while cooking: after we'd finished the main course, she suddenly remembered the onions, which were still roasting in the oven, and didn't think of them again until two days later. I also noticed that though she artfully arranged the lamb on her own plate so that it could be photographed, she didn't eat a bite. "Joe loves lamb," she told me later. "I don't really eat meat. That's one of the reasons I made the salmon course, was sort of for myself."

For me, the salad (which Susan calls "conservative") was a high point of our meal. It was based on arugula and reggiano cheese – "a classic Italian thing" – and spiked with sweet blood oranges and tart lemon vinaigrette.

But the true piece de resistance of the meal was the one dish that was a totally extemporaneous invention – her Meyer lemon tart. Rather than settling for a traditional graham cracker crust, Susan dreamed up an almond paté brisé – a short, rich pastry crust, which she made extra-crunchy by adding coarsely ground almonds. For the filling, she'd planned a classic key lime mixture of fruit juice and sweetened condensed milk, substituting lemon for lime. But when she found no condensed milk in the larder, she whipped up a lemon curd instead, using butter, sugar, flour, egg yolks, lemon rind, and lemon juice. Then, at the last minute, she threw in some mascarpone cheese.

"It gets a little bit stressful sometimes," she told me later, "when things don't work out. I wasn't really sure what would happen with the tart." This time, though, the combination – rich and tangy, with a sandy bite – was kismet.

As far as reference books are concerned, Susan favors a couple by snazzy New York chefs: the *Le Bernardin Cook Book: Four-Star Simplicity* by Maguy Lecoze and Eric Ripert (New York: Doubleday, 1998) and *Jean-Georges: Cooking at Home With a Four-Star Chef* by Jean-Georges Vongerichten (New York: Broadway Books, 1998). She also enjoys *The Sugar Club Cookbook*, by Peter Gordon, a New Zealander who runs a London restaurant called the Sugar Club (San Francisco: Soma Books, 1998). Occasionally, she buys *Vogue Entertaining* and *Travel Australia*, whose recipes are heavy on some of her favorite things – fish, vegetables, and fruit, prepared with Asian, Mediterranean, and English twists. Sometimes, she even goes so far as to read *Martha Stewart Living* – though "I don't consider myself a Martha Stewart devotee," she hastens to add. It's really more that she likes the colors they use, and she knows someone who used to be the art director.

In the course of writing this piece, I also found out that Susan generally hesitates to talk too much about clothing and design. "I feel that as soon as people know about that," she wrote me early on, "they don't take the writing or other things seriously." Yet her design work – just like her poetry, her editing, her cooking, and her gallery activities – just seems like another facet of her exhaustively explore-and-conquer approach to life. She told me once that Joe always tells her, "When in doubt, do it

all," and her ability to do just that seems quite inspiring – not to mention impressively un-neurotic.

But perhaps the German artist Hans Winkler, one of our fellow diners that night, deserves the last word. His show is up now at Pierogi (through April 16) and he says he's loved the experience of working with Susan and Joe. "It's more than just showing your work," he told me that night. "It's the whole atmosphere." Unlike other dealers he's met in New York, "We hang out together. It's more this sharing and talking – you take time and enjoy other things together outside classical art. It's this idea of Gesamtkunstwerke" – in other words, the total artwork.

**Susan's Final Five-Course Menu:**

Caperberries  
Humboldt Fog Cheese  
Sweet Green Olives  
Champagne

Salmon Ceviche with Coriander, Jalapeño, and Lime

Roast Spring Leg of Lamb Stuffed with Mint-Pistachio Paste  
Broccoli, Celery Root, and Porcini Mash  
Cabernet Sauvignon

Baby Arugula with Reggiano Cheese and Blood Oranges with Lemon Vinaigrette

Meyer Lemon Tart with Almond Crust  
Dark Chocolate and Almond Truffles

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