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# UNIVERSITY

## *Neighbors*

Photo by Ginkgo Press



*It's a Delicious World!*

**Meet Joan Peterson and  
Susan Peterson Chwae**



Best Version Media



"Hands down, our favorite country is Turkey," says Susan.



## Joan Peterson and Susan Peterson Chwae

### *For This Mother-Daughter Team, It's a Delicious World*

By Vesna Vuynovich Kovach

**WHEN IT COMES** to international food-focused travel, Joan Peterson wrote the book. Literally.

With her first book, *Eat Smart in Brazil: How to Decipher the Menu, Know the Market Foods & Embark on a Tasting Adventure* (1995), Joan Peterson created the blueprint for a new kind of travel guide, one that put local food at the center of the journey, and put new worlds within the traveler's reach.

"Joan was really on the forefront of culinary travel when she started the business," says Susan Peterson Chwae, her daughter and business partner. "She has always been my best friend and has been such an inspiration to me. Her fearless attitude towards discovering remote areas of the world has taught me so much about myself."

Ginkgo Press includes 14 titles to date in its *Eat Smart* series, most of them written or co-written by Joan. Each devoted to a different international destination: Turkey, Germany, Indonesia and more. In 2018, Gourmand International bestowed the series its top honor, Best in the World in the Food Series category. Of the many laurels heaped upon the *Eat Smart* books over the decades, Joan says this one means the most to her. "The Gourmand awards are the most prestigious in food and wine," she says.







On tour, Joan and David (top row, right) explored markets throughout the Pacific Rim and Carribean.

International culinary and cultural group tours make up the other major part of their business. “When she started leading tours in 1998, there weren’t that many culinary-focused tours out there, so she was able to fill a niche,” says Susan. Many clients have been traveling with them for years. “They can’t get enough of traveling with a culinary focus,” says Joan. “Some even return to the same country with us several times.” Earlier this year, they had to cancel all tours for the remainder of 2020. “Every single person signed up again when we scheduled our 2021 dates.”

A biochemistry researcher for 14 years, Joan was born in Milwaukee. She earned a bachelor’s, master’s and doctorate in cell biology and electron microscopy at the UW-Madison, followed up with post-doctoral degrees in molecular biology and biochemistry. By the time she stopped working in science, her second career had already been decades in the making.

During the Vietnam War, Joan traveled throughout the Pacific Rim and the Carribean with her husband, a UW professor of theater and music. David, who passed away in 2014, was a playwright known for his musicals rooted in Wisconsin folklore. When the United Service Organizations (USO) selected his shows to tour military bases, Joan went along as lighting and sound technician. They spent their days exploring the markets brimming with vegetables, fruits, spices, condiments and the dishes made with them. Every locale was unique. “You can imagine how many foreign food markets we visited all that time,” Joan says. “We never tired of wandering in these markets.”

With their two growing children, Joan and David stuck to domestic travel. Later, as empty nesters, they spread their wings and once again headed overseas. “Traveling was in our bones,” Joan says. “We became even more passionate about foods from other countries. David was a great cook. He took over the kitchen



In Portugal, 25 years after conceiving Eat Smart there in 1992.

Susan at Rüstem Pasha, her favorite mosque in Istanbul, with its brilliantly hued tilework. “It’s easy to get transported back in time. Very few visitors go there.”



for decades. We always searched out new foods or new ways to prepare them.”

Before departing for a trip, Joan tried to learn about special items to try out. “I would compile a list of dishes,” she says. But she yearned to go deeper. “My lists were too inadequate to allow an extensive exploration of the cuisine.” It wasn’t easy to order, either. “At the time, many countries had no menus in English—indeed didn’t even have menus.” Guidebooks of the day could be especially frustrating. You might choose a restaurant from a short list of tourist-friendly spots. But Joan didn’t see any local people





Chef Edward Chwaee creates a five-course meal for the Eat Smart Culinary Dinner Theaters held at vomFass/DelectTable on University Avenue.



Researching *Eat Smart* in Turkey, Joan befriended the owner of a baklava factory.



eating at these places. In fact, mainly she just saw other tourists with the same guidebook she had. And was the food authentic? Who could tell?

She wished there was a better way, for herself and for less seasoned travelers who didn't even know where to begin. Then, in 1992 Joan had an epiphany.

Visiting Portugal, Joan and David were strolling together near their Lisbon hotel. They stopped inside a bakery and inquired about some enticing pastries they chanced to spy through the window. These, they learned, were no ordinary tarts. They were made from a secret, centuries-old recipe originating at an ancient monastery that was obliterated amidst 19th century political turmoil. The recipe narrowly escaped oblivion when a desperate monk sold it to a sugar refinery owner, who then built a bakery—this very bakery. By Portuguese federal law, only this bakery had the right to make these tarts. The tarts were exquisite. People came from all over Portugal to buy them by the dozen. And, had they merely stayed at a different hotel, the Petersons never would have happened across them.

"Just think about all the travelers here in Portugal who don't know these pastries exist," Joan remembers thinking aloud. "Alas, most will go back home without having sampled any." She got an idea. She would create pamphlets "about the foods in foreign countries that one must absolutely taste on a trip there!"

In Brazil, their next stop, she would research "an alphabetical list of menu items with English translations." She spent months there, learning the complex history of this nation, with its many people, regions and food traditions. There was so much to learn, so much to explain. "I chucked the idea of a pamphlet and decided I'd better write a food guidebook instead," she says. "I felt travelers should not miss the fantastic foods on their trips abroad because they didn't know what the foods were or what to ask for."

*Eat Smart in Brazil* was the outcome. There was nothing else like it. It gave you a set of timeless tools for approaching the cuisine. Now you could discover places to eat, instead of choosing from a soon-outdated list. It had phrases the other guides

left out, like "This is delicious!" You could interact with people who weren't in the tourism business. You were going deeper.

You weren't just sightseeing anymore.

Joan was far ahead of her time with all this, and it can be easy to lose sight of how far. The idea of exploring a culture through its food might not seem so revolutionary today. But white tablecloths and tuxedoed waitstaff was the image called to mind by "international dining" until only a few years ago. Heck, as recently as 2003—more than a decade after Joan's custard tart epiphany—the Food Network canceled Anthony Bourdain's first television series as being too weird. Travelers wanted to dine with fancy silverware, not from street vendor stalls, or so thought the network brass.

Already by then, the stack of award-winning *Eat Smart* titles was growing. Joan and Susan had been guiding people through authentic eating experiences for five years. Mainstream or not, they were having a great time, and bringing others along with them.

Joan has enjoyed living in the same home in her tree-lined University Heights neighborhood since 1982, despite her wanderlust. "It's peaceful, so near the campus, as well as elementary and high schools. It's a lovely stable neighborhood." This stability fosters "long-lasting friendships," she says. Joan published the neighborhood directory and the neighborhood association newsletter for several years.

Her daughter picked up those publishing responsibilities for a time, after Joan got too busy with the travel guides. A West High grad, Susan earned a bachelor's in graphic arts from the UW-Madison in 1989. She lives in Cottage Grove with her husband, Edward, but in practice, she's still part of the neighborhood. "I'm there pretty much every day, so I feel like it will always be home for me," she says. "I love that I get to work with my mom every day and share our love for travel," says Susan.

"It's an awesome business relationship that slowly developed over time," says Joan. "We thrive on it, and each others' company. It's amazing how much enjoyment we get from our publishing and touring business. It's truly fun, not work!"





# Picarones

Warm, crispy, and redolent with the sweet, spicy flavors of cinnamon, clove, anise and orange syrup, these doughnut-like rings of fried dough have been a treasure of Peru for over 200 years. This season, enjoy these sweet-potato-and-pumpkin treats at a holiday brunch.

This recipe for the picarones served at the Casa-Hacienda San José in Chincha, Peru, is from *Eat Smart in Peru* by Joan Peterson and Brook Soltvedt, winner of the 2006 Gourmand World Cookbook Award.

**Doughnut-like fried dough made from pumpkin and sweet potato, drizzled in syrup. Serves many.**

## INGREDIENTS

- 5 ounces sweet potato
- ½ pound canned pumpkin
- 1 packet (¾ ounce) active dry yeast
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- ½ cup warm potato water
- 1 ⅓ cups flour
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- Vegetable oil for deep-frying

## SYRUP

- ½ cup water
- 1 cup dark brown sugar
- ¼ cone (2 ounces) chancaca\*
- Peel of ½ orange
- 2 sticks cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon whole cloves
- 1 teaspoon aniseeds

## DIRECTIONS

Boil sweet potato until soft, reserving the cooking water. Peel and mash. Strain and mix with pumpkin in a bowl. To ½ cup of the potato water, cooled to about 100°F, add yeast and sugar and let sit 15 minutes. Add flour, salt and yeast mixture to the pumpkin and squash mixture. Beat well. Cover bowl with a damp towel and place in a 300°F oven for one minute. Turn off heat and leave the bowl in the oven for 45 minutes or until the batter has roughly doubled in volume. While the dough is rising, combine syrup ingredients in a small saucepan and stir over low heat for 20–25 minutes. Strain and set aside. When batter has risen, heat vegetable oil to 325–350°F in a heavy pot. Have ready a finger bowl of water and ice cubes to help keep dough from sticking to your hands. Form balls about 2" in diameter. Poke a hole in the balls with your thumb and drop the rings into the hot oil. When golden on both sides, remove with a slotted spoon and drain. Serve picarones drizzled with syrup.

*\*Chancaca (also called panela) is hard, molded, unrefined sugar made by boiling sugarcane juice until the liquid has evaporated. If unable to find, dark brown sugar can be substituted.*