

Greta goes solo

With attention to detail and ‘Looneyspoonisms’ still in the mix, Greta Podleski’s fifth cookbook is her first without her sister by her side

BY SANDRA WALNECK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK IWANYSHYN

Although she is right on time, Waterloo author Greta Podleski politely apologizes as she rushes in for an interview at a local coffee shop. Barely two weeks had passed since the October release of her new cookbook, and Podleski had a lot on her plate.

Podleski might forgive that bad pun. She and sister, Janet, are the authors of four successful cookbooks – including “The Looneyspoons Collection,” a greatest hits of sorts – that are chock full of clever and amusing word play. And despite this being a departure from prior publications, Greta promises that her lighthearted writing style has not changed.

“I am the same person,” Greta says. “I’m still corny and silly. There are a lot of Looneyspoonisms.”

The big change is that Greta set out on her own to write and publish this cookbook, “Yum & Yummer: Ridiculously Tasty Recipes That’ll Blow Your Mind, But Not Your Diet!”

However, she quickly points out the project has Janet’s blessing and encouragement. The sisters remain very close but, after 20 years as a duo, Greta was ready to fly solo. “I just wanted to be Greta, not ‘Greta and Janet,’ and vice versa,” she explains.

The decision grew out of the sisters’ “what’s next?” conversations after “The

All of the images that accompany recipes in ‘Yum & Yummer’ were photographed by Greta Podleski in a ‘studio’ she created in her bedroom, where the natural lighting was the best.

Try a recipe for hearty Italian soup from her new book, page 102.



Looneyspoons Collection.”

“We both wanted different things,” she says. “She wanted to pursue her education and her public speaking engagements. And I prefer creating. I had an idea for a new cookbook that I’d dreamt up five years ago.”

Greta’s vision for her new project incorporated the Podleskis’ commitment to offering delicious, healthy and easy-to-prepare recipes, but with a technological twist. Every recipe comes equipped with a Quick Scan code that can download a one-minute demonstration video, complete with upbeat background music.

“The videos are to inspire; it’s supposed to be fun and not intimidating,” Podleski explains. “I want kids and newbies to try it. Healthy cooking isn’t difficult.”

At 51, Podleski is a walking example of the benefits of healthy eating. She looks younger than her years and says she is 20

pounds lighter than she was 25 years ago.

Even with recipes readily available online, Podleski believes people want a physical cookbook in their hands. “They want one they might spill spaghetti sauce on, that they can prop open, and that they can write on,” she says. “They are still the bestsellers at the bookstore.”

Each recipe in “Yum & Yummer” is accompanied by a full-page colour photo, and the result is striking. “I wanted a particular look and feel,” Podleski explains. “It took me 18 months to write the book because I did all of the food photography.”

First, she needed to learn how. “I read everything I could find online,” Podleski recalls. “I took two workshops, one in Montreal, one in Minneapolis. I bought lenses and cameras.”

She also sourced every bowl, spoon and

napkin for the shoots, and jokes about opening her own home-décor store with the props in her basement.

Podleski pauses briefly as she flips through her book and lands on the two-page spread captioned “Pesto is the Besto!”

“This is my favourite,” she says. “I remember the day I took that picture and I remember exactly what was happening. I was making them and the smell of the roasted tomatoes was so strong.”

All the recipes were prepared in her home kitchen. Realizing that the natural lighting available in her bedroom was the best in her house, she shoved her bed to the side and set up a “faux studio” in this room.

David Chilton, her longtime life partner and business mentor, says Podleski would obsess over “every pixel.”

“Her attention to detail is incredible,” Chilton says. “She will keep working at it

until it’s perfect. It has to be excellent.”

Chilton initially met the Podleski sisters when they were working to get their first cookbook off the ground. As the successful author of “The Wealthy Barber,” he offered mentoring and financial investment, exactly when they needed it.

Podleski lived in Ottawa when she first met Chilton, but she moved to Waterloo Region in 1998 after they started dating. Her first home was on Paradise Lake. Five years ago, she moved to a house in Waterloo, which she carefully decorated with the same passion she has for cooking.

Podleski was immersed in writing her cookbook for a full 18 months, a time during which Chilton observed her working 12-hour days without a break. “She threw me out of her life,” he jokes. “It was a prudent decision.”

Chilton says he had absolutely no input

into this book and can’t take credit for its success.

“She took six months to basically think,” Chilton recalls. “It was a tremendous amount of preparation. I’ve never seen anybody do that.”

The couple did team up recently as grand marshals of the 2017 Oktoberfest Parade.

“It was so much fun,” exclaims Podleski. “We looked at the carriage they’d provided for us, but we decided to walk. And at the end I told them I could have kept on going!”

Podleski did seek out expert help for “Yum & Yummer” when required. For the book design and videos, Podleski worked with Brittany Stager of Rees + Stager, a local media and digital marketing firm. Stager recalls exactly what happened when she first heard from Podleski in

November 2016.

“I had a total fan-girl moment,” Stager says. “I ran to my bookshelf and pulled out my book with that chef guy running on it and told her that was the first cookbook I ever learned how to cook from.”

A self-described “foodie,” Stager has her own food blog and is the creative force behind Real Food Creative, a division of her firm. “I appreciate food visuals,” she explains. “I know where the ‘hero’ of the photo is, and where the focus on this dish should be. It might be a raspberry on top of the yogurt, or a sprinkle of granola.”

This was a demanding project. “We were shooting two cooking videos per day,” Stager recalls. “From start to finish it was eight months of shooting four days a week.”

Fortunately, the two have the same work ethic. “She is an absolute perfectionist and so am I,” Stager says. “We >>

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**GRETA PODLESKI'S
ITALIAN TURKEY SAUSAGE,
TOMATO & WHITE BEAN SOUP**

When winter weather turns wicked, I like to drown my frosty sorrows in this healthy and hearty Italian soup. It not only warms you up, but it's also a good source of protein and fibre, thanks to the turkey sausage, navy beans and nutrient-packed kale.

- 1 tbsp** olive oil
- 1 lb** (454 g) raw Italian turkey sausage, casings removed
- 1½ cups** chopped sweet onions
- 1 cup** each diced carrots and diced celery
- 2 tsp** minced garlic
- 2 tsp** dried Italian seasoning
- 4 cups** reduced-sodium chicken broth
- 1 can** (28 oz/796 mL) no-salt-added diced tomatoes, well drained

- ¼ cup** tomato paste
- 1 tbsp** balsamic vinegar
- 1 tsp** sugar (any kind; I like coconut sugar)
- ½ tsp** each sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 bay leaf**
- 1 can** (19 oz/540 mL) navy beans, drained and rinsed
- 3 cups** packed chopped fresh kale (ribs removed)
- 8 whole basil leaves, chopped**

1. Heat olive oil in a large soup pot over medium-high heat. Add sausage. Cook and stir until sausage is lightly browned, breaking up any large clumps as it cooks. Add onions, carrots, celery and garlic. Cook and stir until vegetables begin to soften, about 5 minutes.

2. Add Italian seasoning and mix well. Add broth, tomatoes, tomato paste,

balsamic vinegar, sugar, salt, pepper and bay leaf. Bring soup to a boil. Reduce heat to low, cover and simmer for 20 minutes.

3. Add navy beans and kale and simmer for 5 more minutes. Remove soup from heat, remove and discard bay leaf and stir in fresh basil. Taste and add a bit more salt and pepper, if needed. Serve hot.

Makes about eight cups soup

Per cup: 196 calories, 4.6 g total fat (1 g saturated fat), 14.5 g protein, 26 g carbohydrate (6.2 g fibre, 7.2 g sugars), 0 mg cholesterol, 278 mg sodium

YUM: Try baby spinach instead of kale.

YUMMER: Top with freshly grated (or shaved) Parmesan cheese before serving.

A recipe from Greta Podleski's new cookbook, "Yum & Yummer: Ridiculously Tasty Recipes That'll Blow Your Mind, But Not Your Diet!"





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“People will even write me an email while they’re cooking something and they have a question. . . . I love it when I am connecting with people.”

GRETA PODLESKI

>> worked well together because of that. I wouldn’t send her anything for review that I wasn’t totally satisfied with.”

Enjoying this level of mutual trust meant both women are delighted with the results. “The quality is phenomenal,” declares Stager. “We produced something that was so true to her.”

Podleski laughs when she recalls Chilton’s reaction to the finished product. “When he got the book in his hands, he was speechless,” she deadpans. “Which doesn’t happen very often.”

Despite Podleski’s enthusiasm and joy for her project, she admits there were times she wondered if she had bitten off more than she could chew. “There were many moments in the past year when I was over-worked, over-tired and exhausted,” she recalls, saying she still needs a real vacation.

But her genuine affection and connection with her readers and social media followers sustains her. “I wake up energetic every day, and happy every day,” she says. “I’m excited about my book, and the feedback motivates me to keep going.”

Podleski will need that extra boost of energy as she turns her attention to promotion and touring. Her first weekend after the release of the book was spent in Ottawa at a large

food-bloggers convention, doing media interviews and signing copies at a Costco store. Ottawa was where “Looneyspoons” was launched, and Podleski wanted to return there for her initial appearances.

Given her 20-year relationship with retail giants such as Costco and Chapters she was able to secure meetings with their buyers. “This book was unique and different, and they really embraced it,” she says. One of the buyers contacted her and said that it is the first “phygital” book ever sold and that it is already doing very well.

The cookbook has also been popular with independent bookstores and she values their feedback and support. Within two weeks of the book’s release, 75,000 copies had been shipped within Canada.

Chilton believes the most important factor behind her success is her commitment to her readers.

“I liken her to my friend Alex Mustakas,” he says, referring to Drayton Festival Theatre’s artistic director. “They both feel like they work for their customers. The customer is their boss.”

That kind of commitment takes time, but Podleski describes how at the end of the day she will sit down in her robe and fuzzy slippers and reply to everyone who contacts her. This includes everything from comments on the new book to cooking questions.

“People will even write me an email while they’re cooking something and they have a question,” Podleski says. “It is amazing! I try to reply to every single person with a personal note. I love it when I am connecting with people.”

Even the title of her book was inspired by a series of online comments to a recipe.

“They were yum, yum, yum, and then someone wrote ‘yummm,’ ” she recalls.

Keeping her company as she types will be her beloved canine pal, Rico.

The six-year-old Lab-golden retriever-hound mix, adopted from the Kitchener-Waterloo Humane Society, is the apple of her eye.

“He is the most charming, energetic dog ever,” she says.

Whenever possible, the pair will head out along the Grey Silo trails and the Grand River.

And, if enough precious downtime is available, Podleski treasures heading to her cottage on Lake Huron.

“Rico is a water dog, a swimmer, the Michael Phelps of dogs, and he is happiest at the lake,” she says.

Will there be a “Yummiest” book? This weak attempt to name a potential sequel is met with a weary smile.

Possibly, when she has time to rest, there may just be another cookbook on the horizon.

“But I know the title,” Podleski says. “And that’s not it.” 