

# A SLICE OF

# Poetry

Pie Poet Kate Lebo's culinary and literary loves intertwine



Photo by Christopher Nelson

Above: Kate Lebo's latest literary concoction is "A Commonplace Book of Pie."

Story by Claire Sykes ('81)

**S**tart with fresh fruit and some words, a spoon and a pen. Blend the dough with your hands and the phrases with your head. Shape everything into a pie and a poem, then put one in the oven. When done, share with others and devour.

That's the recipe for **Kate Lebo's** passion in life. "I need to bake and cook as much as I need to write," she says. But her pies and poems aren't finished until she includes other people. Even if you avoid making pie or taking in poetry, Lebo ('05, English) dishes out both in a way that's hard to turn down. Meanwhile, one feeds the other for her when she's stirring up her creative juices.

Her latest concoction is "A Commonplace Book of Pie" (Chin Music Press, 2013). The 96-page book, with illustrations by **Jessica Lynn Bonin** ('03, Art – Painting), features Lebo's pie-related questions, advice and recipes; and "fantasy-zodiac" prose poems like "Pumpkin," which begins:

Contrary to popular opinion, pumpkin pie-lovers are adventurous, quizzical, good in bed and voluminously communicative. No need to ask a pumpkin pie-lover if he'll call ahead for reservations.

Says Lebo, "I wanted to make the book accessible, hoping that people who read the poems will want to read more somewhere else."

There's more of her poetry in her first and forthcoming cookbook, "Pie School: Lessons in Fruit, Flour and Butter" (Sasquatch Books, Fall 2014). Lebo, who lives in Seattle, teaches it all hands-on at her Pie School, held in people's homes and elsewhere. At her Pie Stand events around the country, she serves up slices while everyone talks pie, sometimes *à la mode* with readings, performances, and artistic collaborations. And Lebo's other public poetry readings often end with that home-made, fruit-filled pastry.

"She makes it fun, not only because there's going to be delicious pie there, but also because of the nature of her poems and personality. Kate makes me see things in a way I haven't seen before," says Elizabeth Austen, poet and poetry commentator at KUOW in Seattle, who has hosted Lebo.

## Kate Lebo readings:

Dec. 6: Elliott Bay Book Co. in Seattle.

Dec. 12: Village Books in Bellingham.

Jan. 8: The Station in Seattle, with poet Erin Malone.

Jan. 23: University Bookstore, Seattle.

March 27: Northwind Arts Center, Port Townsend, with poet Kary Wayson.

Lebo's writing has also appeared in "Best New Poets," *Gastronomica*, and *Poetry Northwest*, among others. She received a Nelson Bentley Fellowship, the Joan Grayston Poetry Prize, and a 4Culture grant. A longtime zine zealot, she is an editor for the hand-made literary journal, *Filter*. For many years she worked at Richard Hugo House, a writing center in Seattle, doing everything from running the volunteer program to planning fundraisers. And her pies? Lebo judged the Iowa State Fair Pie Contest, baked at the American Gothic House, and won Best in Show at the first annual Cake vs. Pie Competition.

She was 24 when she rolled out her first pie crust. Growing up in Vancouver, Wash., "I was always knitting and sewing, making things. Making pies was another way to satisfy that hunger. What you make in the kitchen can be art and should be valued," says Lebo, with a riot grrrl past, a penchant for vintage dresses, and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Washington. "I write at the kitchen table and cook at the stove, both at the same time. I have something to do while I'm writing, which keeps my butt in the chair."

Lebo learned all about discipline at Western, whose creative writing professors encouraged her to take graduate-level courses and taught her "to value the long way," she says, by revising and writing many drafts.

With both pies and poetry, she starts with the raw materials: seasonal fruits and "sound, image and love. I write what I see, hear or touch, building poems from what I perceive with my senses rather than what I'm judging in my head." For her pies, her eyes, nose and mouth take in the colors and textures, scents and flavors, "and then I base the recipe around that."

In "A Commonplace Book of Pie," Lebo insists on ice-cold lard and butter, and going easy on the sugar and spices. The tenth and last of her "Rules of Thumb" reads, "Pies can take four hours to make. Forgive the pie maker her tardiness." When she finally arrives, those poems of hers will taste pretty darn good, too.

*Claire Sykes* ('81, *Community Services and the Arts*) is a freelance writer based in Portland, Ore., who writes about the arts, wellness, business and other topics for publications in the U.S. and abroad. Her most recent story for *Window* was a profile of photographer **Michael Christopher Brown** ('00). Her favorite pie is strawberry-rhubarb.

See the book trailer for "A Commonplace Book of Pie" at [www.wvu.edu/window](http://www.wvu.edu/window)



Illustrations by Jessica Lynn Bonin ('03)