

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

A Million Dollar Cookie: Kerstin Sinkevicius helps people through cancer research and cooking.

Tony Kahn:

Hi, everybody, this is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. [a drummer plays percussion behind Tony's introduction] Every year, a hundred finalists from around the United States gather in a big hotel room somewhere to compete for the grand prize of the Pillsbury National Bake-Off Contest. Now, if you read the headlines after it's all over you'd probably think that it's a story of one winner and ninety-nine losers. But look a little bit closer, you'll notice that each of these hundred bakers are baking something unique. It's a hundred stories, their own recipes born of their imaginations, their family traditions probably, to bring something sweet of their own into the world. One of those hundred finalists lives and works near our studios here at WGBH. She's a cancer researcher named Kerstin Sinkevicius. She came in the other day with a fresh sample of her entry, the Caramel Chai Bar, and a story about some of the secret ingredients that went into her recipe. A warning for those of you who may be a little bit squeamish, there's going to be a lot of chewing in this podcast. We call her Morning Story *A Million Dollar Cookie*.

All right . . .

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

You have to be honest.

Tony Kahn:

[Takes a whiff] Ooooo! [sniffs] Oh, man, I like the smell! Cinnamon . . . [sniffs] . . . apple? [exhales] . . . filtered through . . . [sniffs] some kind of floral smell; [voice drops to near whisper] I'm not sure what it is. [pauses] I like the crunchy top. [takes a bite, chews]

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

[Chuckles] Hm!

Tony Kahn:

[Crunches] Mmm. Really moist. Chewy . . . now I'm going to test the crust part of it.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

That's important.

Tony Kahn:

[With mouth blissfully full] Mm-kay. Would I make a good judge? [crunch-crunch-crunches]

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Yeah!

Tony Kahn:

[Through packed cheeks] Mm, mm-kay. Going after a different experience here.
[Kerstin chuckles and agrees] This is sensational.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Oh, thank you. I think the flavors balance each other really well.

Tony Kahn:

[Muffled by cookie] They do!

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

I don't think [Tony: "Mmm!"] it's, like, too overwhelmingly chai.

Tony Kahn:

No, it's not. [happy chewing comes to an end] Kerstin, you've got my vote!

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Thank you. You should be a judge.

I entered thirty recipes. This is the one they picked, Caramel Chai Bars. I would have been happy if anything got picked [laughs]. I had a recipe I, I thought would make it, for a dessert sushi recipe.

Tony Kahn:

Sushi?

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

I thought it was a pretty creative idea, but [laughs] . . .

Tony Kahn:

I'll say!

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

It's because when I got married we had sushi at our rehearsal dinner [Tony: "Mm-hm."] and I wanted to do a theme, like all good brides do, right? [they both chuckle] And I couldn't find a good recipe online so I started thinking about, um, how to do that.

Tony Kahn:

So you have often been in over your head.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Uh, sometimes. Yeah. [laughs]

Last Thursday my lab went skiing, and [laughs] it was only my second time going, but I was determined to try from the top of the mountain and [laughs] it was horrible!

Tony Kahn:

You really felt that you could ski?

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

No. [after a pause they both laugh]

Tony Kahn:

So, you went to a relatively dangerous height [Kerstin answers: "Yeah!"] to go down that hill because . . . ?

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

I just thought I should try it! Yeah.

Tony Kahn:

You just thought you should try it.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

[Laughs] Well, I think I look for new experiences because I'm competitive and I'm willing to try different things, even if I'm not necessarily good at it. I'm so like, [Liz heard "It's really, I might as well try"] "I might as well try." [with an audible smile] Yeah.

Also, I decided I was ready for a change in my postdoc. I completely switched fields. I'm interested in tumor recurrence, why the tumor comes back and grows bigger. Doing it I think I have a greater potential to help people.

My brother and I were planned four years apart, so that my parents could cover college for both of us. I mean, I think they did everything right. I actually take a lot after them. My dad is a chemist at Dupont and my mom teaches culinary arts at a vocational school, so I have both the science and the cooking. [laughs] From both sides.

Tony Kahn:

Mm-hm.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Um, she's actually gonna come to the Bake-Off with me. We'll be there together. Yeah.

Tony Kahn:

Her temperament, is it like yours?

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Yeah.

Tony Kahn:

You started making cookies with her when you were four years old, right?

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Yeah. I was pretty young. Making peanut butter cookies, and then we would roll them out into different shapes and I'd, like, make a snake and then put little chocolate chip for eyes.

Um, I think it's about love. You know, it takes time, and people put love into food when they make it for other people.

Tony Kahn:

My mother-in-law died recently. Fifty years of recipes in the kitchen, and an incredible record of experiences. My wife was seeing her whole relationship with her mother.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

There was one special cookbook that my mom had that I think fondly of. [Tony: "Mm-hm."] Yeah. It has a picture of a cupcake on the front, I think, and it's pink and it's really worn out now 'cause we used it so often. And then her other favorite recipes that aren't from that cookbook she would write on paper and be stuck in between some of them [chuckles], the pages. Yeah. That was definitely one of my favorites.

Tony Kahn:

How would your life be affected by being the winner?

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

I haven't had kids yet but when we do . . . [Tony: "Mm-hm."] we won't have to worry about their college education.

Tony Kahn:

Do for your kids what was done for you.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Right.

Tony Kahn:

How much is the prize?

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

A million dollars.

Tony Kahn:

[Choking] O-o-ohh!

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

You didn't know that? [they both laugh]

Tony Kahn:

I was thinking a hundred thousand!

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Yeah, no, it's a million. [chuckling] And there's so many good recipes I don't think . . . I'm gonna win, so . . . you know, I'm just going to have fun, having the experience [Tony: "Uh-huh."], be with my mom, sharing that.

Tony Kahn:

That seems to be like a really important part of this story, it's --

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Yeah, that . . . no, that's probably one of the most important. Um, you know, I found out that my mom has a brain tumor, and it's . . . it just makes you . . . um, [emotion rising in her voice] treasure everything. She had radiation treatment and the tumor hasn't, um, . . . shrunk, but it hasn't gotten larger either. But she's still in pain every day.

Tony Kahn:

I'm sorry. Yeah.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

That's okay. [laughs] So I was holding back a little bit. [laughs nervously]

Tony Kahn:

[Comfortingly] Of course!

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Yeah. And she didn't tell me either, which is very upsetting. [laughs]

Tony Kahn:

Well, how'd you find out?

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Uh, she came to visit for my birthday and told me she had a little problem and she was going in to get treatment, like the next month. So I took off work and went and . . . yeah.

Tony Kahn:

Any of the conversations about the future?

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

[Pauses] No. Even if things are bad, [emotionally] I don't know if my mom would tell me.

Tony Kahn:

Mmm.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Because she wants to, like, shield people. I try to tell her, like, [with a quavering voice] "I need to know," but . . .

You know your parents give you advice in every stage of life and I haven't had kids yet, so it's a big one.

Tony Kahn:

You want her to be there for that.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Yeah, yeah. The positives they would see in me would [emotion rising] partly be because of her. So . . .

Um . . . she has the best attitude of anyone that I know. You would have no idea if you met her. She's a go-getter. [laughs]

Tony Kahn:

I think I might because I've met her daughter.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

[Laughs] Oh! [laughs]

Tony Kahn:

Yeah.

[Gentle guitar solo begins]

Tony Kahn:

Important research for cancer and the National Pillsbury Bake-Off Contest. Incredible tributes to your mom.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Yeah. [laughs] Hunh!

It would be nice to, you know, think about moms making this with their kids

and bonding over something and

Tony Kahn:

I wish the judges could taste all of the things [Kerstin agrees and laughs] that go into a recipe. Thanks.

Kerstin Sinkevicius:

Thank you.

[Guitar plays on]

Tony Kahn:

That was Kerstin Sinkevicius with today's Morning Story, *A Million Dollar Cookie*. I'm here in our listening room with Gary Mott.

Gary Mott:

Well, I mean, this story takes me back to my youth, in fact.

Tony Kahn:

Uh-huh . . .

Gary Mott:

Um, I fancied myself a, you know, a cook, [Tony: "Uh-huh?"] a chef. I wrote a series of cookbooks . . .

Tony Kahn:

[Incredulously] You did?

Gary Mott:

. . . on three by five cards.

Tony Kahn:

No kidding.

Gary Mott:

Yes. And every recipe started with two cups of flour.

Tony Kahn:

[Chuckling] I thought that two cups of flour was for making glue [Gary laughs] when you were a kid! Wasn't it?

Gary Mott:

One time I actually made one of these recipes. It was a, uh, a sponge cake. [Tony: "Hmmm!"] And sure enough, . . .

Tony Kahn:

Two cups of flour . . . [Gary laughs]

Gary Mott:

It came out and you could have scrubbed the floor with it. [Tony snickers] It was a sponge!

Tony Kahn:

No kidding!

Gary Mott:

No kidding.

Tony Kahn:

I, I thought . . .

Gary Mott:

It was edible!

Tony Kahn:

Yeah . . .

Gary Mott:

But it was a sponge!

Tony Kahn:

I did some baking with my son when he was very young. He got an assignment from his class to make some Friendship Bread. Have you heard of Friendship Bread?

Gary Mott:

Friendship Bread, yeah.

Tony Kahn:

You make the recipe and then you save a little bit of the dough before you bake it to pass on to the next person, 'cause that, you know, keeps that, that yeast. Unfortunately, somewhere along the line we, we goofed and we started to put in twice the amount of eggs. I figured, well, uh, I'll, I'll teach my son something about arithmetic. So I said, "Andrew, why don't we double everything? [Tony and Gary laugh] And then probably we'll be okay!" [Tony laughs harder] So we ended up pounding away at this stuff and had a great time, and we ended up with something that looked kind of like a human lung. [chuckles] Still, you know, I took a little bit of the dough that was left and I, I passed it on to the next person, and uh, I never heard from them again, but uh . . .

Gary Mott:

You had a great time with your son.

Tony Kahn:

I did.

We've been getting a lot of mail, by the way. We just wanted to thank you for your many letters of appreciation and support. Keep 'em coming. And if you have any stories of your own, about cooking, something that happened in the kitchen, pass 'em on. We'd love to share them.

Gary Mott:

<wgbh.org/morningstories> [guitar music begins again quietly] Plenty to see and do and hear there, and please, get in touch. <morningstories@wgbh.org>

Tony Kahn:

And we'll be back with you real soon, so take care. 'Bye.

[Guitar music swells and plays on, meditatively, then fades]

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Georgia Buchert

Notes from transcriber:

This podcast struck a familial chord in me. I have so many memories connecting food and maternal love. Just now, I'm thinking of my mother, who died from cancer the year I turned 30. She, like her mother and grandmother before her, was a great cook, and specialized in sweets from the oven. I'm remembering one of her recipes in particular which became very popular among our circle of family and friends: "Peggy's Pound Cake." This used to be called "Sterling's Cake" until my mom made it locally famous and rightfully changed its name. I'm remembering a dangerous game we used to play at our house whenever this taste of baked goods heaven was on display in the kitchen; the wicked winner of the game would be the person with the stealthiest knife, the lucky so-and-so who managed to make off with the delicious top of the cake and devour it without being caught. It was always such a rankling disappointment to slip in for a slice of that incredible cake and find that its golden crown of delectable perfection was missing. But the rest of it was good too. Especially with strawberries and whipped cream – never a bad consolation prize for the losers.

After my mother died my grandmother would occasionally make me a "Peggy's Pound Cake" and mail it, swaddled in half a pound of cellophane, three thousand miles to the west so that I could eat myself sick and feel some mother-love. My husband and I would devour it in an awful hungry hurry, and bless him, even while our greedy cake crumbs were flying, he would frequently have the sweet presence of mind to let me cut off the tender top of his share of the gold.

Note from Liz:

I, too, have familial stories intertwined with cooking and baking. My father's profession was cooking, although he rarely cooked at home for any group smaller than a crowd. But on the holidays my mother (who was a Christian) celebrated, my parents invited the lonely souls they knew to come enjoy the holiday feasts with our family, and my Jewish daddy cooked the Christmas turkey, the Easter ham, etc. (He also supervised the cooking at the local synagogue's congregational Seders, bringing my sister and me to them to introduce us to that tradition from his own heritage.)

Another sort of "family" cooking memory I have is a series of wonderful cooking lessons I enjoyed from a Sudanese woman who was living in the same university family student housing complex I lived in when my daughter was a baby. Safia, my Sudanese friend, could not speak very much English, but we passed such wonderful hours together in her kitchen, where she introduced me to specialities from her part of the world. When she went back to the Sudan, we'd become so close that she called me "her sister!"

My mother liked to bake, and I learned from her some of the joys of that aspect of kitchen bounty. So from my youth and young adulthood, family and near-family members from all three branches of "People of the Book" involved me with their varieties of food preparation!