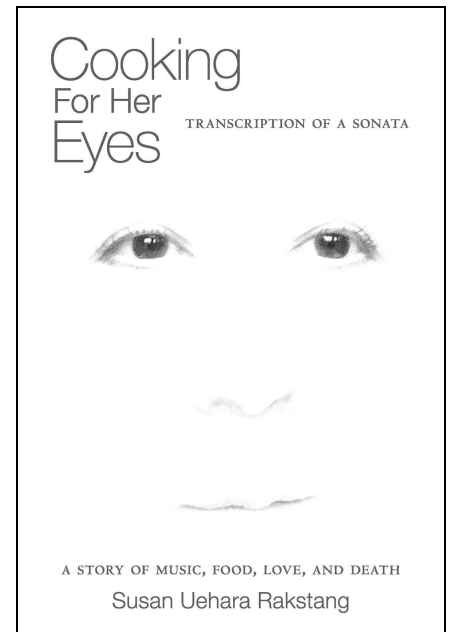


## *Cooking for Her Eyes: Transcription of a Sonata*

A Story of Music, Food, Love, and Death  
By Susan Uehara Rakstang

Susan Rakstang's memoir recalls her early life as the child of Japanese-American parents and her mother's cooking lessons full of delicious tastes, exquisite fragrances, and the visual art of preparing food; through her fast-paced, frenzied years in a battle with time juggling her responsibilities as a wife, mother of two children, and working outside the home as an architect—a pioneering path not often pursued by women in the mid-1970s—and then after retirement, when life suddenly takes a dark turn. Susan's beloved mother suffers a stroke and her friend Margaret, a pastry chef, receives a terrifying diagnosis of stage-four cancer of the tongue. With both women's lives hanging perilously in the balance, Susan spends her days and evenings alternately tending to each. Learning Margaret's cancer treatment will cause horrific pain and temporary loss of taste, Susan develops a pureed food preparation technique for her friend's meals, focusing on the natural, visual beauty of food, and cooks for Margaret's eyes.

Blending the detail and precision of an architect with the color, tempo, and texture of her classical music roots, Susan beckons her readers to embrace their senses as she takes them on her journey of music, food, love, and death in *Cooking for Her Eyes* (Quarter Rest Publications; October 1, 2020). Organizing her story as Beethoven structured his Sonata No. 8, she transcribes her anxiety, passion, joy, sorrow, and resolution as the maestro expressed in his sonata.



Born in Hawaii and raised in Chicago, **Susan Uehara Rakstang**, a retired architect, lives in Chicago's West Loop with her husband, Bob, and their cockapoo, Tony. *Cooking for Her Eyes* is her first book. You can find recipes from the book at her website [theartandarchitectureofpuree.com](http://theartandarchitectureofpuree.com).

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## Interview Questions for Susan Uehara Rakstang:

### *What inspired you to start writing this book?*

It is a story about three women who were bonded by friendship, love, and food. My Japanese-American mother, Helen, cooked her meals not just to nourish an appetite but also to nourish our souls, providing us with visual delights of textures, a riot of color, fragrances, and the exquisite tastes of her Japanese comfort foods.

When my friend, Margaret, went through chemotherapy and chemoradiation therapy for tongue cancer, she developed dysphagia, which made it difficult to swallow. Knowing she would have trouble eating, I created a technique for preparing her meals—comfort foods such as meatloaf, mashed potatoes, green beans; hamburger and French fries; and beef stew—all were pureed but still resembled the foods Margaret used to love. They were whimsical, colorful, beautiful, and had three-dimensional elements that I'd hoped would bring her a smile. As I prepared Margaret's meals, I learned that many head and neck cancer patients experienced dysphagia, and I thought sharing my technique might help them through their journey with cancer.

### *What literary pilgrimages have you taken for purposes of this book?*

When my mother had a stroke, I realized I knew little about her beyond the loving, nurturing mother and great cook that she was. Who was she? Even though she was proud of her Japanese/Okinawan heritage, why did she have an Anglo name? Why did my parents move from the island of paradise, Hawai'i, to Chicago? How did she meet my father? Why did my parents have so few Japanese-American friends? Why couldn't I ask my mother these simple questions?

It was too late to learn the answers from her—of my mother's five sisters, two of them had passed away, but her three younger sisters remained healthy and well. After I began writing my book, I made my pilgrimage to Hawai'i to visit my now elderly aunties to learn about my mother before I was born, and they shared vignettes of their remembrances of her life. A year later, I returned to visit Hawai'i's Plantation Village, a museum in the historic town of Waipahu, Hawai'i, where I would have a glimpse of my mother's parents' lives after they immigrated from Okinawa to Hawai'i in the early 1900s to become indentured servants to the sugar plantation owners under the watchful eye of brutal supervisors. Hawai'i's Plantation Village chronicled the lives of immigrants through photographs, authentic documents, artifacts, restored buildings, and replicas of houses where groups of Japanese and Southeast Asian laborers lived while toiling on the plantation. After Hawai'i, I traveled to Okinawa, an island off mainland Japan, to visit my grandfather's sons and their families, and had dinner in the house my grandfather built and retired, lived, and died in.

***What did you learn when writing this book?***

As I wrote my story, I was startled when I summoned my brain to bring forth memories regarding specific incidents and found I was rarely disappointed. Events that occurred many decades ago would present themselves when I beckoned them—it was an empowering and exciting experience. I'll leave it up to the neuroscientists to explain the encoding, storing, and retrieval of memories. But in many ways, the brain's phenomenon reminded me of an equally befuddling object in our lives—our computer's hard drive. Like the hard drive that stores all my programs, files, and operating systems standing ready for retrieval, my brain, I learned, saved nearly everything I'd heard, saw, smelled, tasted, and touched in the past, and it seemed eager to bring forth all the data I needed to write. Memories are all there, floating around in my head—I just had to give myself a few prompts, and my recollection flooded forth. Had I not written my memoir, I would never have discovered this wondrous miracle—although, please don't ask me what I had for dinner yesterday!

## About Susan Uehara Rakstang:



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**SUSAN UEHARA RAKSTANG** was born in Hawai'i and raised in Chicago by her Japanese-American parents. Susan entered the male-dominated world of architecture in the 1970s as a mother of two and eventually started her own architecture firm. Now retired, she lives in Chicago's West Loop with her husband, Bob, and their cockapoo, Tony. She has studied and played classical piano for over twenty years, inspiring the experimental form of writing used in her first book, *Cooking For Her Eyes: Transcription of a Sonata*. You can find recipes from the book at her website [theartandarchitectureofpuree.com](https://theartandarchitectureofpuree.com).

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