

Russian cuisine

Traditional Russian foods vary as greatly as the climatic zones through which the country stretches. Many basic recipes are similar in remotely situated areas, but each has its own local variation.

The long and severe winters make it necessary to preserve every possible kind of produce in large quantities. Through the centuries resourcefulness and fantasy have been put to the test to discover suitable ways to pickle, spice, cure or dry vegetables, fruits, berries, mushrooms, and meat. Hence Russian cuisine is noted for its abundance of appetizers, soups and other dishes in which the main ingredient is spiced, pickled or cured. Russian cooking has also been influenced by the design of the Russian oven. Russian cuisine today also abounds in new recipes that are in keeping with contemporary concepts of food and advanced kitchen facilities.

APPETIZERS

Russian "zakuski" are usually a hearty introduction to a still heartier meal. They begin with several kinds of salted and pickled fruits, vegetables, and mushrooms and are followed by copious hot or cold savouries.

SOUPS

It is doubtful whether any cuisine in the world can claim a variety of soups as large as that known in Russian cooking. Through the centuries the assortment of traditional Russian soups has undergone little change and in the dinner menu the term "first course" still means soup. The word itself appeared in the Russian vocabulary in the time of Peter the Great when it was used in reference to foreign liquid dishes.

Russian dishes of this type were called "pokhlebka". The classification of traditional Russian soups, as known today, has been traced back to 16th and 17th century annals. And today as in those times they are shchi (cabbage soup), borsch (beet soup), rassolnik (cucumber pickle and brine soup), ukha (fresh-water fish soup), solyanka (was originally applied to any food eaten by the peasantry. Today solyanka denotes a savoury, tart

food in which sauerkraut or pickled cucumbers are one of the main ingredients).

PELMENI

Pelmeni are Russian poached pasties that have a meat filling. When one says "pelmeni" he thinks of traditional Siberian pelmeni. Neighbours gather after the frosts set in for special "session" or "bees" where pelmeni are made in quantities running into the thousands. They are laid out on huge dough boards and carried outside to freeze, after which they are dumped into sacks like so many pebbles and stored away until needed.

KASHA

Cereals (in Russia are known as "kasha") make a variety of dishes that range from common porridge or gruel to Uzbek pilau (plov). Puffy and fluffy kasha is prepared of whole-grain or cracked cereal (rice, pearl barley, buckwheat). The porridge or gruel type of kasha may be made of any cereal, usually with milk.

RUSSIAN OVEN

This rectangular, box-shaped structure made of brick and mortar was usually about half the height of the ceiling and occupied about a quarter of the kitchen space (if the old peasant hut had a kitchen). If the hut was a one-room affair, the oven served numerous purposes from a facility inside which food was cooked and water was heated to a winter playpen for the younger children and/or a bed for the older generation.

Since the old Russian village consisted of thatched huts, all fires had to be out and dampers closed by sunrise. Thus the oven served as a sort of thermos jug where in summer meals were kept hot from 4 or 5 a.m. till evening, and sometimes till the following day. The food acquired a peculiar sapid flavour.

Although the Russian oven is today somewhat of a museum piece, the recipes that originated in this oven remain popular, and with slight modifications in method of cooking they can be made in the modern range.

RECEPIES

APPETIZERS

RUSSIAN VEGETABLE SALAD WITH FISH

250 g fillet of fish
1 (100 g) onion
1 (100 g) beet
150 g sauerkraut
2 (200 g) carrots
50 g salad dressing
3 (150 g) potatoes
100 g canned peas
100 g green onions
100 g pickled plums
150 g pickled cucumbers - Greens

Either boiled or fried fish may be used in this salad. Boil a beet, carrot and potatoes; chill and cut up along with the pickled cucumber. Slice the onion into half rings. Mince the green onions and slice the tomatoes. Squeeze the sauerkraut, but if it is too sour, wash it cold water, squeeze and then add. Cut the fish into little chunks. Combine with vinegar and oil dressing or maynnaise. If boiled fish is used, add the green peas and pickled plums. Garnish with greens.

CHOPPED HERRING

200 g filleted herring
2 tbl sps unsalted butter
100 g white bread
1 onion
1 large apple
Nutmeg

Mince the herring, apple, and onion and press through a sieve together with the bread which has been soaked and squeezed dry. Combine with the butter and mix thoroughly with a paddle or spoon. Add a dash of ground nutmeg if desired. Serve in an oblong dish. Put the herring head at one end and the tail at the other. Garnish with sliced apple and sprigs of parsley. For variety, finely grated apple may be added. Serve in a butter dish or spread on slices of deep fried bread.

MUSHROOM "CAVIAR"

250 g pickled mushrooms
or Lemon or vinegar
50 g dried mushrooms
Minced green onions
1 or 2 tbl sps vegetable oil
1 onion
Pepper

Any pickled mushrooms or cooked dried mushrooms may be used. Wash and drain the pickled mushrooms and chop fine. Mince the onion and saute in oil, cool and add to the mushrooms. Add salt and pepper to taste. Add a little lemon juice or vinegar. Sprinkle with minced green onions.

SOUPS

SHCHI

300 g meat
Pepper, salt and bay leaf
800 g plain cabbage
Flour for thickening
200 g vegetable roots
onion
Potatoes (optional)
200 g tomatoes
2 tbl sps butter

Cook the meat in 1+1/2 litres water for 1 and 1/2 to 2 hours to make a stock. Remove the meat. Clean, slice and brown the roots and onion. Strain the stock onto the roots and onion. Add the meat and shredded cabbage. Cook for 25 to 30 minutes. Add pepper, bay leaf and salt to taste. Cook another 5 to 10 minutes. If desired, Potatoes may be added after the cabbage has been cooked for 10 to 15 minutes. Add sliced tomatoes at the end and cook together with the condiment. If made without potatoes, thicken the shchi with browned flour.

SUMMER BORSHCH

1 bunch of beets
Salt, pepper, cloves, bay leaf
3-4 potatoes
Sour cream or cold scalded milk
1 carrot
1+1/2 litres mushroom stock
1-2 tomatoes
50-75 g green onions
1 stalk of celery
200 g marrow

Cook the beetroots and carrot in mushroom stock for 10 to 15 minutes. Add the beet leaves and stems which had been cut into pieces 2 to 3 cm long and scalded, the marrow, tomatoes, potatoes, green onion, celery and condiments. Cook until the vegetables are tender. Add sour cream, scalded milk or sour milk before serving.

RASSOLNIK

(Pickled Cucumber Soup)

500 g beef kidney
2 tbl sps butter
2 pickled cucumbers
100 g sorrel or lettuce
2 parsley roots
Pickle brine
1 celery stalk
Sour cream or cream
1 onion
Minced dill or parsley
4 potatoes

Cut each kidney into 3 or 4 pieces, wash, cover with water and bring to the boil. Drain, wash the kidney again, cover with cold water and cook for 1 to 1 and 1/2 hours. Sauté the vegetable roots and onion in butter in the soup kettle. Remove from the heat. Peel, slice and cook the pickles separately. Cut the potatoes into chunks and add to the vegetables. Pour in the strained stock and simmer for 20 to 25 minutes. Add the pickles and strained pickle brine (for savouriness) and shredded sorrel (or lettuce). Salt to taste. Cook for 5 to 10 minutes. Before serving put pieces of kidney and a spoonful of sour cream or cream in each plate. Sprinkle with the minced parsley or dill.

TART MEAT SOLYANKA

500 g meat for stock
1/4 lemon
300 g any boiled or roast meat
1 tbl sp capers
4 pickled cucumbers
3 tbl sps butter
2 onions
Olives
2 tbl sps tomato puree
100 g sour cream

Prepare the soup stock. Slice the onion and sauté in butter, add the tomato puree, a little stock and braise. Peel the pickles, cut in half, slice and boil for 20-25 minutes. Dice the meat (boiled or roast beef, ham, veal, kidneys, tongue, sausages) and add to the onion together with cooked pickle, capers and a bay leaf. Add the stock and boil gently for 5 to 10 minutes. If desired, sliced tomato may be added. Salt to taste. Put an olive, 1/4 slice of lemon (peeled) in each plate and top with a spoonful of sour cream. Sprinkle with minced parsley or dill.

BLINY (Russian Pancakes)

1 kg flour
2 tbl sps sugar
4 to 5 cupsful milk
1+1/2 t sps salt
3 tbl sps butter
40 g yeast
2 eggs

Make the sponge by dissolving the yeast in 2 cupsful of warm water and adding 500 g flour. Mix until smooth, cover with a cloth and set aside in a warm place for about an hour, or until the batter becomes bubbly. Add the salt, sugar, egg yolks, melted butter and mix thoroughly. Gradually add the rest of the flour and beat until smooth. Add the warm milk gradually, cup by cup and mix the batter thoroughly. Cover with a cloth and set aside in a warm place to rise. After the batter rises, beat until it settles and then stir in beaten egg whites. As soon as the batter rises, cook the pancakes on a hot griddle. The batter should rise no less than 3 times.