

Nosdrovyea!!

For almost 20 years with few exceptions, I have reserved the first or second Sunday of January (depending on which was closest to the 6th) for the celebration of Russian Christmas, or what some would call *Old or Little* Christmas. Starting about two in the afternoon, family, friends, and neighbors begin pouring into my home to share the fellowship that can't help but follow the fragrance of steaming Ukrainian-Style Winter Borshch, Russian Honey Cakes and Spiced Tea.

Granted, they are not coming to a truly traditional celebration. If it were, they would be arriving in the wee hours of the morning of January 7th after returning from Midnight Mass, bringing holy water to bless each room. Before attending the Orthodox mass, they would have broken their 24-hour fast by eating together with their families from a single bowl of porridge called Kutya, a Christmas Eve ritual dish made from mixed grains slow-cooked over low heat, sweetened with dried fruit and honey to symbolize hope, and a sprinkling of poppy seeds for happiness and peace.

The spirit of my yearly gathering, with its abundance of music, food, and warm hugs, reaches close enough for me to feel the deep satisfaction

that comes from revisiting and revitalizing not only my connection to my ethnic heritage, but from celebrating the diverse community in which I find myself now, nearly 80 years and 3,000 miles from where it all began.

It is hard to believe that so much time has passed since I celebrated the traditional Orthodox holidays of Christmas and Easter with my Russian grandparents, and yet fragments of those events have never stopped dancing around the edges of my memory. The sweetest and most prevailing one, perhaps, is of being tickled awake by the bushy mustache of the burly grandfather I called “Tato”, as he lifted me from the back seat of his big old Packard and carried me from the barn into the house through falling snow sometime after midnight.

I couldn't have been but three or four and would have fallen asleep on the drive back from church, still wrapped in the pungent scent of incense and bedecked in powdered sugar from the little cookies that children were given as we left the building, each carrying a lighted candle to welcome the blessed child. It would have been Tato who carried me during that procession and tucked me into the blankets waiting in the back seat of the car.

Upon arrival at my grandparents' home, my mother, my 'little gramma', and my Aunty Jeanette,

just eight years older than I and 14 years younger than her sister, would have been dropped off at the door.

My father, a staunch German Lutheran who did not participate in such ceremonies, was at that point still allowing us to go and had accepted the job of keeping the fires in both the kitchen and living room stoves burning to insure that not only would the house be warm upon our return, but that the enormous goose in the oven would be cooked to perfection, guaranteed to have plenty left over for friends who would be dropping by later in the day to wish each other “Nosdrovyeya!” for the coming year.

My Russian Christmas celebrations, I have to confess, are really more Eastern European overall and don't involve a goose; but they do feature the wonderful winter borshch whose fragrance rivals that of a roasting bird any day. On the serving table there are Polish-Style Golumpki, (Cabbage Rolls) stuffed with rice and ground meat, wearing a light cover of stewed tomatoes, along with Vareniki, or Pierogi, those darling little dumplings stuffed with farmer's cheese and onions, or potatoes and sauerkraut, which become radically decadent when fried in butter and dressed in sour cream.

Always there is the Zakuska Table, with its arrangement of both hot and cold appetizers, some

of my favorites being pickled red cabbage, herring in sour cream, cucumbers in yogurt generously sprinkled with dill, slices of Gypsy Salami and Kielbasa alongside heavy, dark bread and a little dish of Horseradish Butter.

I purchase most of these items from the Russian markets and ethnic deli shops that grace our Portland neighborhoods, leaving me more time to focus on the borshch, which remains the favorite of guests both old and new (even those who say they don't like beets).

Probably the most visually pleasing of the new traditions I've established is the Pickled Egg Table facing the entry. A tray of pink eggs takes the place of the traditional iced vodka *Nosdrovyea!* "toast to good health" for the coming year. Traditionally, *Nosdrovyea!* (or Na Zdrowie!) is punctuated with the raising and downing of a vodka shot. Depending on how many others one might like to wish good health, you can see how this practice could become somewhat debilitating.

Instead, I set up a table with an arrangement of peeled hard-boiled eggs that have been patiently immersed for the past week in a brine of beet juice, vinegar, sugar, and a variety of spices. Once removed from the brine, the eggs are sliced in half lengthwise and arranged to expose their rich yellow

yolks surrounded by lovely pink ovals. Lovely to look at, easy to hold, and even after half an egg here and half an egg there, nobody needs a designated driver.

Before the pandemic, my celebration was an open-house affair with folks coming and going into the early evening, usually filling up the cozy rooms of my home, although the most crowded spot was always around the food. I like it that way. I like it that my usually quiet space becomes crowded and noisy and that the sharing and enjoyment of honest-to-goodness food has the power to nourish and to unite so many backgrounds and personalities.

Especially, I like feeling what I imagine to be my grandparents' pleasure knowing that not all the old ways from the old country have been abandoned. And I like it too that each year the rooms of my home are blessed with the Holy Water of Friendship. I wonder what will happen next.

Nosdrovyea!!

An earlier version of this story was published in the Winter 2009 issue of *Edible Portland*. It included the recipe for Ukrainian-Style Borshch, which you will also find in my latest book, *All In The*

Soup Together ... Four Seasons of Recipes & Reflections. I'm delighted to share it with you here as well.

Ukranian-Style Winter Borshch

Ingredients:

- 4 Medium-size tomatoes, peeled and diced, (or a 15-oz can drained)
- 4 Tbs unsalted butter
- 1 Cup onion, diced
- 3 Large cloves garlic, peeled & finely chopped
- 1 Lb beets, uncooked, trimmed, peeled & very coarsely grated (makes about 2 cups)
- 1 Celeriac (celery root) treated the same way
- 1 Parsley root, peeled & coarsely chopped
- 1 Parsnip, treated the same way
- ½ tsp sugar
- ¼ Cup red wine vinegar
- ½ Tbs coarse salt
- 2 Quarts beef or vegetable stock
- 3 Potatoes, peeled & cut into chunks

- ½ Medium or 1 small head of cabbage, cored & coarsely shredded
- 1 Lb beef or pork (optional) cut into 1" chunks seared and partly cooked
- 2 Tbs parsley, finely chopped (for garnish)
- 1 Pint thick (Russian) Sour Cream (stir in with garnish)

Instructions:

1. If using fresh tomatoes, peel, dice, & set aside (discard juice)
2. In a large, heavy skillet, melt the butter over medium heat. Add onions & garlic and cook 6-8 minutes or until onions are soft, stirring frequently. Stir in half the tomatoes plus all the beets, celeriac, parsley root, parsnip, sugar, vinegar, salt & 1 ½ cups of stock. Bring to a boil over high heat, then partially cover and lower the heat to simmer for 40 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, pour the remaining stock into a 6-8 quart soup pot, add the potatoes & cabbage and simmer, partially covered, for 18-20 minutes until the potatoes are tender, but not mushy.

4. Add the other vegetable mixture along with the remaining tomatoes and meat (if using) to the pot containing the potatoes & cabbage. Simmer, again partially covered, for 10-15 minutes until the borscht is heated completely through. Taste for seasoning, add more salt if needed and black pepper to taste.
5. Pour into a soup tureen, sprinkle with parsley and serve with a huge dollop of sour cream (which I like to swirl in).
6. ENJOY!! (This recipe makes about 8 servings)