

The Joy of Soviet Cooking



Anna
Kharzeeva

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT that Julie Powell, author of *Julie and Julia*, had actually met her heroine, Julia Child. Then imagine that they worked through all 524 of the recipes in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* together. Picture Julie slicing and dicing (and dishwashing) while Julia sips wine and urges fearlessness.

This is pretty close to what Anna Kharzeeva, 28, food blogger and founder of the Moscow-based Samovar Cookery School, is doing with her grandmother, Elena Moiseyevna. The pair are cooking their way through the iconic Soviet culinary bible, *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*. Each week or so, Kharzeeva tackles a recipe from “The Book” (as it is known to its fans, such as Anya von Bremzen, author of *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking*) while her grandmother coaches, puts the recipes into historical context, and, more often than not, rescues Kharzeeva from certain culinary disaster.

Kharzeeva then blogs about their adventures for *Russia Beyond the Headlines* in posts that are informative, witty, and always full of culinary fun.

Kharzeeva and Moiseyevna have very different attitudes towards The Book. Kharzeeva, typical of her generation of cosmopolitan Muscovites, loves international cuisine and is frankly more at home with Jamie Oliver than Anastas Mikoyan, Stalin’s Commissar for Foreign Trade whose passionate pet project The Book was. For her, The Book at times seems like a relic from a bygone era.

To Moiseyevna*, however, The Book is comfortable and familiar. As well it should be: Mikoyan dedicated it to her. Not to her, personally, of course, but to all Soviet housewives when it was first published in 1939, and then later re-released in the optimistic post-war era. The 1952 edition contained a staggering 1,400 recipes in

* Moiseyevna is of course the patronymic of Anna Kharzeeva’s babushka. It is common, in Russian, to refer to someone you know well by simply using their patronymic.



Anna Kharzeeva learns from her grandmother, Elena Moiseyevna.



its 400 pages. The Book has sold over eight million copies and is still in print (there is also an English translation).

“Everyone used it,” Moiseyevna recalled. “Old women, young women, heavens, even men used it!”

The Book, with its emphasis on nutrition (and a surprisingly un-Communist chapter urging proper table settings and manners), encouraged a return to peacetime stability, gentility, and domesticity after the devastation of World War II. It skillfully outlined the culinary know-how previously only found in the pre-revolutionary cookery books by Elena Molokhovets (*The Gift to Young Housewives*) and Pelageya Alexandrova-Ignateva (*Foundations of Culinary Arts*).

Moiseyevna said that this was a welcome update, as the pre-revolutionary standards contained outdated instructions that were, to the Soviet experience, downright fantastical: “They advised things like, ‘if you expect guests, go down to your cold storage room and take half side a lamb...’ well, you can imagine that this wasn’t really very practical advice for us,” she chuckled, recalling the long lines and food shortages of the Brezhnev era.

The Book does include a handful of complex recipes, but most are limited to a very short list of simple ingredients with easy-to-follow instructions. Reflecting the intense industrialization and mass-production of the era, and with a nod to the practicalities of everyday life in 1950s USSR, The Book’s recipes often call for processed, frozen or tinned food, rather than fresh ingredients. The objective was to make if possible for Soviet women (who far outnumbered men in the post-war era) to both work and run the home.

Moiseyevna acknowledged The Book for the propaganda tool that it was. Though the recipes are accessible, the lavish color illustrations of groaning banquet tables painted an idealized picture of Soviet life that was almost as fantastical for her contemporaries as the idea of a pre-revolutionary cold storage room with half a side lamb in it.

“Back then, you know, there was very little fuss about food – you just cooked and ate what you could find, and that was it,” she explained as we shredded cabbage for The Book’s version of summer cabbage soup – *shchi* – with

root vegetables. “It wasn’t as if you could look up a recipe, decide what to make, and then go out and easily source the ingredients. That’s probably why the recipes in The Book are so simple. We needed basic foundational recipes on which we could improvise.”

This is how Moiseyevna became such an accomplished cook. She’s creative, feeling her way instinctively around the flavors, finding the rigors of The Book experiment a bit confining. She would prefer to improvise, and her tiny but cozy Moscow kitchen boasts cupboards crammed with jars of spices, grains, and sauces. This is something she inherited from her own grandmother, who was renowned in her neighborhood as an illustrious baker of Sabbath challah bread. Sadly, her recipe was lost in the tumult of the twentieth century, but her enthusiasm for the culinary arts has been lovingly handed down through the generations.

“I only ever like Granny’s soups,” Anna confessed as we sat down to eat our soup. It sounded like a very lackluster recipe in The Book’s pared down recipe: cabbage, potatoes, beef, carrots, onions, and salt and pepper. But not in Moiseyevna’s hands. The result is delectable. Moiseyevna took plenty of time and trouble over the broth, braising the meat for a marvelously rich flavor. True to form, she put her own stamp on the recipe.

The Book of Healthy and Tasty Food was translated into English by Boris Ushumirsky. He includes “root vegetables” and “cabbage sprouts” in the ingredients for this lighter, summertime version of the hearty, full-on, a-spoon-can-stand-up-in-it cabbage soup.

These were my cues to improvise, mindful that summer shchi is meant to be clubbed together from dacha garden and forage bounty. Using the freshest of seasonal ingredients is the key to making it really shine. I substituted parsnips for potatoes: the former hold their shape longer and have a much more distinctive flavor that complements the cabbage really well.

To enhance the flavor of the broth, I added caraway seeds for a nutty undertone and juniper berries for zing. I borrowed Moiseyevna’s technique of braising the meat in the broth. Fennel and fennel fronds were my substitute for cabbage sprouts, and I loved the slightly sweet hint of anise they added to this light, but very satisfying soup full of the flavor and optimism of the post-war era. I garnish the summer shchi with sour cream and fennel fronds and offer caraway-flavored aquavit as a wonderful appetite whetter.



Dacha Summer Shchi

- 4 quarts best quality chicken stock
- 1 lb. organic beef brisket or beef chuck
- 2 cups shredded cabbage or cabbage sprouts
- 1 cup fresh fennel bulb, cut into matchsticks
- 1½ cup parsnips, peeled and cut into matchsticks
- 1 cup carrot, peeled and cut into matchsticks
- 1 cup yellow onion, peeled and finely minced
- 2 tsp virgin olive oil
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 tsp whole juniper berries, crushed
- 2 tsp caraway seeds
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Sour cream for garnish
- ¼ cup fennel fronds, or dill

Place the chicken broth, bay leaves, juniper berries, beef brisket, and a generous pinch of salt in a large, heavy-bottomed Dutch oven or soup pot. Bring to a boil, then lower the heat and simmer for 35 minutes.

Remove the beef to a plate to cool to room temperature. When it has cooled, use a fork to shred the beef.

Add the parsnips and carrots to the broth and simmer for 10 minutes.

Heat the olive oil in a sauté pan, and sauté the onion until it softens (about 7-9 minutes). Then add the fennel matchsticks and cabbage and cook until they begin to soften. Sprinkle the mixture with a pinch of salt, a good sturdy grind of the pepper mill, and half the caraway seeds. Cook for another 3-4 minutes until the cabbage has completely wilted.

Add the onion and fennel mixture to the soup pot along with the remainder of the caraway seeds. Add the cooked beef. Taste and adjust seasoning with salt and pepper. Cover, and let simmer for an additional 15 minutes.

Serve in a shallow soup bowl, garnished with a dollop of sour cream and some fennel fronds.