

A Trip Down Soviet Culinary Lane

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Глаголики: Г-shaped sugar cookies

As you wander through the aisles of your local grocery store, you might notice a curious phenomenon: a growing nostalgia for советская кухня (Soviet cooking). Пельмени (meat dumplings) are once again packaged in gray cardboard boxes with faded orange lettering, pastry display cases are filled with слоеные язычки (puff pastries) and women in 1930s costumes are selling мороженое в стаканчике (ice cream cones) at GUM.

For foreigners who spent time in the Brezhnev-era Soviet Union, this nostalgia might seem a bit misplaced. I would personally like to forget the standard Intourist lunch fare of mystery meat in sauce on overcooked buckwheat groats. Nor do I ever want to stand in line for three hours to buy a half-kilo of greenish tinged колбаса (cold cuts). But the good stuff, when you could get it (достать), really was good. And perhaps it tasted even better because it was a rare treat. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, with people and буженина (cold roast pork).

In any case, here's a guide to some of Soviet cooking's Greatest Hits.

First, look for the abbreviation ГОСТ (state standard). Starting in 1925, recipes were developed and assigned state standard numbers to ensure that, say, the докторская колбаса (dietetic baloney — an oxymoron if there ever was one) you bought in Kazan was exactly the same as the stuff you bought in Kiev. Think McDonald's, only on a nationwide scale. And lest you sneer, some of these recipe developers knew what they were doing. The ГОСТ recipe for докторская колбаса includes a bit of cardamom and nutmeg. Who knew?

But beware: ГОСТ is now a marketing tool, and if you read carefully you might find that the ГОСТ on сгущенка (sweetened condensed milk) is actually for safety standards at the factory and not for the recipe itself.

Но не будем о плохом (let's not talk about bad things). Instead we'll push our mental shopping cart toward кулинария (delicatessen, deli section), which is a store or section of a grocery store selling ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat food. Here you might want to sample икра (caviar) — not the fish roe, but the thick vegetable puree: кабачковая (squash), баклажанная (eggplant) or грибная (mushroom). Now stores try to make it as close as possible to what one person calls вкус кабачковой икры времён социализма (the taste of squash caviar from the age of socialism).

But probably the tastiest food made from the Soviet recipe file can be found in the выпечка (baked goods) section of your grocery store. Start with some глаголики — sugar cookies in the shape of the letter Г, which used to be called глагол (verb) in the Russian alphabet. Try some шоколадные картошки (chocolate pastry "potatoes"), which are made by mixing cake crumbs with milk, butter, sugar and сгущенка and then rolling the mass in cocoa and sugar. And end with a сочник (from the word сочный — moist), a shortcrust pastry filled with творог (pot cheese) and сметана (sour cream).

For a special occasion, order a торт Киевский (Kiev cake), a nut-packed, modified angel food cake with a butter-cream filling, or the famous Птичье молоко (Bird's Milk cake), which has thick soufflé in between two thin layers of cake.

You might find yourself agreeing with this old ditty: Каждый школьник знает с парты / Как важны стране стандарты, loosely translated as: Every schoolchild knows the answer! What's a country without its standards?

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