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Shock the Guests on New Year's Eve

Herring under a fur coat gets a delicious makeover

By Jennifer Eremeeva

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This ain't your babushka's fish dish **Jennifer Eremeeva / MT**

New Year's Eve is here and with it the annual two-day salad-making marathon required to prepare the *zakuski* or *hors d'oeuvres* that are an essential part of the festive board each December 31.

If there is a single traditional, classic main course for New Year's Eve, I'm not aware of it. When it comes to Russian New Year, it's about the alcohol, of course; but after that, it's all about the *zakuski*. More is more when it comes to "Tetrising your Table" as Bonnie Frumpkin Morales, owner of Kachka Restaurant in Oregon, refers to in her eponymous cookbook "Kachka: A Return to Russian Cooking": the challenge of squeezing as many platters, plates, and decorative bowls as you can over the entire surface area of your dining table.

On any occasion, Russian etiquette dictates *zakuski* should be arranged on the platters with meticulous precision — a tradition I believe dates back to the Soviet era when both the quality

and quantity of food was often dubious — but, on New Year's Eve, any Russian housewife worth her salt pulls out all the decorative stops. It is on December 31 that we witness table arrangement elevated into an art form.

"Do the glistening regimented ranks of Latvian sprats look better next to the Gzhel plate of deviled eggs?" wonders our nervous housewife, as she tops each egg with a pyramid of garish orange caviar, "Or would they look better alongside a Catherine wheel of deep red, perfectly cut salami ellipses? Should you fan out the Borodinsky bread slices next to the classic sliced white bread, or keep them separate? Half the tomatoes or quarter them?"

But none of these dilemmas is anything compared to the performance pressure associated with assembling and presenting those twin centerpieces of the New Year's Eve banquet: Salad "Olivier," the mayonnaise-based potato, carrot, ham, and pea salad, and Herring Under Fur Coat, which consists of beets, pickled herring, gherkins, hard-boiled egg, and, you guessed it, mayonnaise. Opinion differs sharply—and often acrimoniously— as to whether you should layer these ingredients for contrast you display in a cut glass bowl, or if you should toss them together so that the colors meld together.

I know where I stand.

An ex-boyfriend of mine took up with a woman of dubious morals some years ago, and each year he sends me pictures of her Herring Under Fur Coat. The woman believes in tossing her ingredients, resulting each year in a particularly lurid violet covered in electric yellow grated hard-boiled egg. Each year, I respond by sending him back several Instagram-worthy shots my own version of the classic: one year I sent shots of beet-dyed deviled eggs with carefully piped swirls of herring-spiked egg yolk. Another year, I posted a *nouvelle cuisine* version: perfectly layered and exquisitely lit individual towers of Herring Under Fur Coat, over which I labored far too long and used way too many photographic filters, but I feel sure he regrets his choice. If only of mayonnaise salads.

It may be the woman of dubious morals and her lurid purple salads, but each year I feel an uncontrollable urge to riff on these classic Russian New Year salads. This is not the sort of thing that is encouraged in Russia, where tradition trumps creativity every time. You wouldn't change a semi-colon in Pushkin, the theory goes, so why on earth would you try to reinterpret Salad "Olivier" or Herring Under Fur Coat?

Nevertheless, I persist.

Persimmons provided this year's inspiration. I chanced to overhear two English voices pondering what on earth they might be at the market. I could not help butting in.

"They are delicious," I gushed. "Imagine a peach, and apricot have a baby, and a grapefruit is the godmother." Luckily these were the kind of adventurous expats who don't arrive in Moscow with one entire moving container filled with boxes of Rice-A -Roni™ and Annie's Mac & Cheese™ in their shipment. These ladies were game to try the funky orange fruit, and in solidarity, I purchased several kilos myself.

Persimmons have a smooth flavor that is nevertheless very rich and deep; they aren't overly sweet but will provide an interesting foil to anything tart. This makes them inspired additions

crisp, peppery greens such watercress. When paired with other dusky fruits and vegetables, a persimmon will play as nicely as you like, so it wasn't too long before I tried them with beets, both roasted and raw, and the combination of these two slightly sweet velvety textures was a winner.

So, voila! I give you this year's Herring Under Fur Coat, which does not actually feature any herring since persimmons, it turns out, don't want to play with lip-puckering pickled herring -- and can you blame them? Instead, I broke out a stash of smoked trout, but cured or smoked salmon would work equally well for this. Add roasted beets, steamed fingerling potatoes and the lightest of yogurt dressings.

I feel well prepared to kill it in the annual photo challenge.

Beet, Persimmon, and Smoked Trout Salad

For the sauce

- 125 ml mayonnaise
- 125 ml Greek yogurt
- Juice of one lemon
- 2 Tbsp best quality olive oil
- 2 Tbsp chopped fresh dill
- 2 Tbsp chopped fresh chives
- ½-tsp cayenne pepper or a few dashes of Tabasco
- 2 cloves garlic grated with a microplane or finely minced

For the salad

- 500 grams smoked fish like trout, halibut, or salmon, skin removed, flaked
- 300 grams tiny fingerling potatoes, scrubbed
- 2 Tbsp olive oil with more for drizzling
- 2 medium-sized beets
- 1 persimmon (this is optional, but if you can find one, do include it)
- 1 large bunch of fresh dill, coarsely chopped
- 250 ml pea shoots or microgreens (substitute rocket, watercress or other greens)
- 3 Tbsp fresh orange juice
- Salt and pepper

Instructions

Make the sauce

- Combine the ingredients in a food processor fitted with a steel blade or a blender. Process until smooth.
- Chill for at least 1 hour to allow the flavors to bloom.

Prepare the vegetables

- Roast the beets wrapped in tin foil at your oven's highest setting for 30 minutes until the tip of a sharp knife easily pierces the skin. Cool to room temperature before peeling and

dicing into small cubes. Toss with the orange juice and set aside.
- Blanche the fingerling potatoes in a pot of boiling, salted water until the point of a sharp knife pierces the flesh easily (6-8 minutes, depending on size). Drain and toss with the olive oil and season with salt. Let cool to room temperature, then slice lengthwise.

Assemble the salad

- Slice the persimmon very thinly using a mandoline or very sharp knife.
- Spoon most of the sauce onto a serving platter, then arrange the vegetables and flaked fish in a decorative pattern on top, augmenting the plate with the dill and microgreens.
- Drizzle more olive oil and the remainder of the sauce on top.

Happy New Year!

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