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The Borshch Battles

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Борщ: borshch

About a thousand years ago, give or take 500 years, some Greek traders came to the southern part of what is now Russia bringing a tasty grain from the East. Because Greeks brought it, Russians called it греческий злак (Greek cereal). Today it is commonly called гречка ("greeky").

About 150 years ago this grain began to arrive on American shores in the bags of people from Eastern-Central Europe and the Russian Empire. They made it into каша (porridge). But the English speakers thought каша was the name of the grain itself. So they called it kasha in the U.S. even though it already had a name in English: buckwheat groats.

And since some of those bags with гречка belonged to Jewish emigrants, and some of those

Jewish emigrants made delicious little pies called kasha knishes they sold from handcarts, Americans decided kasha — aka гречка aka buckwheat groats — was the proprietary food of Jewish people. To this day, they sell this grain in the Jewish Food section of grocery stores.

And since those same Jewish emigrants shared their former neighbors' fondness for борщ, Americans thought borsht — spelled with a "t" in the U.S. — was "Jewish," too. In fact, they called a region north of New York City that used to have vacation hotels catering to Jewish families "the Borsht Belt."

The moral of this story: food travels, and as it travels it gets new names and becomes associated with whichever national group happens to bring it to a new place. Is it any wonder that people argue about who ate what when and where?

This week there has been some arguing about борщ. Who invented it? Was it first a Russian or Polish or Ukrainian or Lithuanian soup? Did one national group invent it and did another national group appropriate it or claim it for its own when travelers brought it? I decided to look into this subject from the point of view of language, thinking that the first ethnic group that named it would have created it.

But a form of the word борщ is native to more than a half dozen languages. How can that be?

Here's how. A long time before there were nation states or even, perhaps, the nationalities we know today, the people who lived on lands stretching from the Black Sea all the way north through today's Baltic states spoke what is called Proto-Baltic-Slavic. That is, linguists have reconstructed a language that they posit people spoke up to about 1000 B.C., before they moved, settled, and developed their own dialects that would eventually become the different languages of Russian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and so on.

During that time period, linguists think there was a word something like "bursktis" that meant sharp. After 1000 B.C., when some of the languages had broken off into Proto-Slavic (the precursor of Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian), they called a plant with sharp leaves "bъršč̌ь." This plant was similar to today's борщевик (common hogweed), the edible relative of the dangerously poisonous giant hogweed. In some regions the plant борщ might have been an early version of cow parsnip, a relative of hogweed.

And then, as these hogweed-eating people moved and developed their own languages, they kept eating the plant and called it their version of the ancient name.

For example, in 966, the Polish chronicles describe how the plant barszcz was used as the basis for an excellent soup prized in Poland, Lithuania and Russia. In 1547, борщ was praised in the Russian Домострой (Domestic Order): собери борща возле забора, заквась его и подготовь к зиме (pick the hogweed by the fence, ferment it and put it up for winter). This sour liquid was used to make the soup. It seems that folks all over Central, Eastern Europe, up through the Baltics and back down through Russia, Belarus and Ukraine were making some kind of soup out of the plant called борщ.

They may have been cooking up a storm, but they weren't writing cookbooks or scribbling recipes on birch bark to send to their relatives in a distant village. So it's impossible to know what these various forms of борщ were like.

Meanwhile, that proto language was happily developing into different distinct languages. Two sources I found write that in what is now Ukraine, by the 18th century the term борщ meant beet kvas, which was used in a soup called борщ. And later we know that beets became almost essential for the soup борщ in Ukraine.

But here's a fun fact: that old version of Ukrainian beet борщ was... pale yellow. According to culinary historian Pavel Syutkin, until the 15th or 16th centuries beets were yellow or white and only turned red after plant selection. And then, according to Olia Hercules in her cookbook "Summer Kitchens," once beets were red, the soup was a deep burgundy color, much darker than it is today.

Why is that? Because the soup had yet to go through its next metamorphosis when the Americas sent over картофель (potatoes) and помидоры aka томаты (tomatoes). These changed the taste and, importantly, the color of борщ in Ukraine.

And while we're here, note the names. Potatoes came to Russia via Germany (Kartoffel) and tomatoes arrived from several countries: Spain (tomate), France (pomme d'amour), and Italy (pomodoro).

Another change occurred when the Soviet Union was formed. Beginning in the 1950s, cookbook authors and publishers made their own decisions about the origin of dishes, and they also altered and homogenized some recipes to make them easier to cook and more appetizing to the many diverse national groups inhabiting the enormous country.

Now борщи encompass hundreds of soups that are similar only in the way they are prepared: a variety of vegetables are sauteed separately and added to a broth made from meat, poultry, fish, mushrooms or vegetables.

But back to the argument: with so many versions of this ancient soup made all over the region, can борщ be given the UNESCO status of part of the "intangible cultural heritage" of Ukraine?

My opinion? Sure! Red beet Ukrainian borshch served with чесночные пампушки (garlicky rolls) is definitely part of the Ukrainian cultural heritage — although it is blessedly not intangible.

But, you shout, what about all those other борщи?! Why can't Poles submit barszcz as their national intangible cultural heritage? Or why can't Russians submit a regional борщ recipe?

Who said they can't? There is no reason why each country with a beloved, unique, celebrated version of borshch should not get it recognized.

There's always plenty of borshch to go around.

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