

The Magic of Crab and Melon Okroshka

Pretend it's summer on Kamchatka with this cold summer soup.

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When we recently became the happy owners of a second small refrigerator, I celebrated with a trip to the market and loaded up on bulky stuff like kale, beets and their greens, celery root, an obscene number of eggplants, and several perfectly ripe melons.

“Do we need four melons?” asked my husband, who I think imagined the second fridge holding something liquid and hops-based.

“Of course!” I said, feigning deep offense at the insinuation that I might lose my sense of proportion at a summer farmer’s market. “I’m going to make something wonderfully delicious and cool with them — you watch.”

He shrugged and walked away. It takes a special kind of guy to live with a food writer, and my husband is that guy.

But the game was now on, but I was ready to hatch something long imagined: an upscale version of okroshka.

Okroshka is one of the great joys of the short, but intense Russian summer. This cold soup filled with chopped vegetables and cured meat is a nourishing and delicious way to eat healthily and well when it is too hot to move. Made with either kvass or kefir, classic okroshka contains hard-boiled eggs, radishes, cucumbers, ham or Bologna, and lots and lots of fresh herbs. I love to experiment with okroshka, and I wrote a few years ago in this column about adapting the basic recipe into regional riffs: shrimp and more dill make it Baltic, roasted red peppers and chorizo make it Mediterranean, and feta and olive oil make it Greek.

I had long wanted to try a version of okroshka with crab and was intrigued by the idea of pairing the pungent sweetness of shellfish from Russia's east with melon.

After a few false starts — it turns out crab, melon, and hard-boiled eggs don't work well together — I got to the current recipe, which is now entrenched in the summer cold soup rotation. Adding melon to the base of the soup gives it a lovely, sweet underpinning, while the cucumbers give it the much-needed crunch. All of this is the perfect backdrop for the richness of the crab with an unexpected note of saltiness from frizzled and crumbled prosciutto.

If you are not fond of crab, try shrimp in this recipe, or leave it out entirely. If you like the idea of the soup but want it vegetarian, add some additional crunchy summer vegetables such as radishes and peppers. This is the perfect recipe for a hot summer lunch or a starter for a barbecue, elegant enough to dazzle any guest or a delicious treat for the family.

Added bonus? The second fridge is all mine.

Ingredients

- 4 oz (110 g) cured ham or meat such as prosciutto or capocollo, sliced as thinly as possible
- 1 ripe cantaloupe, de-seeded and divided into two equal halves
- 3 medium-sized cucumbers, peeled, and sliced into small cubes (approximately one centimeter or $\frac{2}{3}$ inch.)
- 2 cups (475 ml) plain Greek yogurt or Armenian Matsoni
- 2 cups (475 ml) plain kefir
- 2 Tbsp sea salt
- 1 tsp white pepper
- 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (60 ml) chopped fresh mint
- 3 Tbsp chopped fresh dill
- 6-8 oz (170 - 225 g) lump crabmeat (fresh is best, but tinned works perfectly well in this recipe)

Garnish

- 1 tsp sumac or red pepper
- 2 Tbsp snipped chives or scallions

Instructions

- Preheat the oven to 400°F (220°C), and line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Lay the slices of cured ham on the baking tray and cook for 15–20 minutes in the pre-heated oven until crisp. Set aside to cool.
- Toss the cucumbers with one tablespoon of salt and set them in a colander to drain for at least one hour. Rinse, pat dry with paper towel, and chill until ready to serve.
- Scoop the flesh of one half of the cantaloupe out of the rind and place it in a food processor fitted with a steel blade. Process until the melon is a thick, smooth liquid. Add the Greek yogurt and kefir and process until combined.
- Add the salt, peppers, mint, and dill and pulse to combine.
- Slice the remaining cantaloupe into small cubes, the same size as the cucumbers. Fold the cucumbers, cantaloupe, and half of the crabmeat into the liquid. Chill for at least 2 hours before serving.
- Serve in chilled bowls or glasses and top the soup with the remaining crab and the frizzled ham. Garnish with snipped scallions or chives and sprinkle a bit of sumac or red pepper on the surface.

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