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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# Back to School With Crispy Herbed Chicken Cutlets

## Child-approved and perfect for the lunchbox.

By Jennifer Eremeeva

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**Jennifer Eremeeva / MT**

Russian children return to school on Sept. 1 enacting the charming annual rituals of "The Day of Knowledge." Dressed in their finest school uniforms, with starched hair bows large enough to levitate a kindergartener several feet in a strong wind, students come to school with their parents, bringing impressive floral tributes for their teachers to mark the beginning of the academic year.

If you are tired of Day of Knowledge scenes, then you are tired of life. Few occasions in Russia are more picturesque or moving. When I lived opposite a schoolyard, I spent much of the day perched on my window seat enjoying the festive atmosphere, the charming scenes of new students, weighed down by bouquets almost as big as they were, clinging to a parent's hand.

I'm no longer in the lunchbox business, but back in the day, I spent a lot of time agonizing over what to pack in my daughter's lunchbox. She was an incredibly finicky eater as a child, flatly refusing to eat the hot lunch her international school in Moscow provided. So, I got up early each morning to fill a thermos with homemade soup and load up the compartments of a cool metal Bento box with pasta salad, finger sandwiches, hummus, fruit, and other healthy but appealing items.

What I didn't know — and have only recently discovered — is that as soon as my daughter got to school, she traded most of the contents of her lunchbox with her classmates. I take comfort in the fact that my lovingly curated lunchbox contents were wildly popular with my daughter's Korean, Irish, Scottish, and German classmates, who vied with one another for the homemade soup, pesto, ham and cheese sandwiches, and hummus offering instant pot noodles, shortbread, and sushi in exchange. The only thing my daughter refused to trade were chicken cutlets (котлеты), for which she had — and still retains — a very Slavic passion. Thank God, really — they are probably the only reason she did not perish from malnutrition.

Cutlets are a national passion with the Russians. Somewhere between a hamburger and a meatball, they are delightful meat patties, ideally juicy and tender on the inside and crispy and crunchy on the outside. Though they are often found in workplace canteens and buffets, cutlets are very much a homemade dish. Like thrifty rissoles, cutlets were — and still are — popular with Russian homemakers because they use up any scraps and stale bread lying around, and come together quickly and easily, making them the ideal weeknight meal. My husband has fond memories of turning the handle of the meat grinder in his youth, but today cutlets come together even more efficiently in the food processor.

Cutlets can be made from any kind of meat, or, indeed, a combination of meats, though pork on its own is very greasy. My favorite cutlets meat is chicken, which I always regard as a culinary blank canvas on which I can imprint my own flavors, using any herbs lingering in the crisper or (as is the case right now) growing out of control in my sadly neglected garden. I also take the extra step of caramelizing onions, which provides a deep umami boost to the finished product. Debate rages in Russia whether to use stale or fresh bread to bind the cutlets, and whether to soak the bread. I'm in the fresh bread soaked in milk camp, but I also throw in some mayonnaise to keep the cutlets very moist.

You can fry cutlets until they are finished, but after years of experimenting with the recipe below, I've found that searing them quickly and then baking them in an oven for 25 minutes is the best way to ensure that the cutlets get to that tricky intersection of still crispy but not burnt on the outside and cooked through not raw on the inside.

And then we come to the crust. There are those who prefer cutlets without a crunchy exterior, but I love a good topping of breadcrumbs, flour, or something I've just discovered that beats both. In a riot of pre-autumnal tidying this week, I found no fewer than six bags of mostly eaten potato chips lurking in the pantry where family members had wantonly abandoned them. I was on the verge of chucking them out when I thought better of it. I blitzed them in the food processor and used them to coat the cutlets instead of flour or breadcrumbs. This was a tremendous success, creating a shatteringly crispy surface and a nice salty flavor. I now keep a jar of crushed potato chips ready for cutlets.

Play around with the recipe that follows, substituting different meat or fish for the chicken. Mushrooms, spinach, carrots, and parsnips would all work well as a vegetarian option as long as they are sauteed ahead of time, and, with the spinach, strained to get rid of any excess liquid. Try adding a bit of cheese to help bind these together.

Cutlets pair well with all kinds of side dishes: buckwheat and mushroom kasha, mashed potatoes, or a seasonal vegetable salad. And, of course, they do splendidly in lunch boxes.

Happy Day of Knowledge to us all!

*Ingredients*

Yield: 12-14 cutlets

- 1 ½ (350 ml) cups fresh bread cubes, crusts removed
- ½ tsp nutmeg
- ¾ cup (180 ml) milk, heated for 1 minute
- 1 ¼ (300 ml) cups finely chopped white onion
- 1 Tbsp butter
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 lbs. (1 kilo) chicken meat (a mix of thigh and breast) cut into cubes
- Zest of one lemon
- 1 Tbsp mayonnaise
- 1 tsp red pepper
- ⅔-cup (150 ml) minced herbs
- 1 Tbsp prepared horseradish
- 2 cups (475 ml) crushed potato chips or 1-½ cups (350 ml) of panko bread crumbs.
- 3 Tbsp vegetable oil

*Sauce*

- 1 cup (236 ml) Greek yogurt or sour cream
- ½ cup (120 ml) honey mustard
- 2 Tbsp lemon juice
- 3 Tbsp chopped herbs

*Instructions*

- Submerge the bread cubes and nutmeg in the warm milk, cover, and set aside for 30 minutes.
- Sauté the onion and garlic in the butter over low heat until they are soft, brown, and just beginning to caramelize (30 minutes). Set aside to cool to room temperature.
- Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C) and line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
- Place the cooked and cooled onion and bread mixtures into a food processor fitted with a steel blade. Pulse to combine, then use a spatula to remove the mixture from the food processor.
- Place the chicken into the empty food processor and pulse several times. Add the bread and onion mixture and pulse a few more times to combine thoroughly. Add the mayonnaise, horseradish, red pepper, and lemon zest and pulse to combine. Finally, add

the chopped herbs and pulse until everything is well combined. The mixture may have a few small chunks of meat in it — that's fine.
- Spread the potato chip crumbs or panko in a shallow dish. Wet your hands with water and form an oval-shaped patty from the chicken mixture about 3-inches long and 1-½-inches wide (8 centimeters long by 3 centimeters wide).
- Coat each patty with the crumb mixture and place the patties on the prepared baking sheet.
- Heat the vegetable oil over medium high heat in a skillet until a crumb sizzles on impact. Fry the cutlets in batches until the crust is golden (about 2 minutes per side) then return them to the baking sheet. When all the cutlets are done, bake them in the preheated oven for 25 minutes.
- While the cutlets are cooking, whisk together all the ingredients for the sauce and refrigerate until it is time to serve the cutlets.
- Serve the cutlets hot with the sauce on the side.

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