The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kapustniak: The Hangover Soup

It's never to early to prepare for the holiday season.

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November 20, 2021



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It’s that happy time of year when we can all go a little (or a lot) overboard on the festive beverages. A cautious return to in-person office parties seems imminent in many places, and with that in mind, I added various hangover remedies to my weekly shopping list, knowing that as November morphs into December, we may well need them.

As a foreigner in Russia, my faith in over-the-counter medicaments such as Alka-Seltzer and Beecham’s Resolve often garners me scorn from the natives. And to be fair, after more than two decades of life in Russia, I have developed a genuine respect for the hangover remedies that emerge from the kitchen. Whatever the symptom: dry mouth, headache, nausea, dizziness, or fatigue, some combination of a lot of liquid combined with various combinations of salt, spice, fat, protein, acid, and most times, more alcohol will often get the job done faster than any drug store equivalent.

Case in point: on a recent trip to Portugal, a pleasant afternoon of port tasting resulted in a somewhat painful morning after. I should know better: red wine of any kind just shellacs me, and my glib assurances (to myself) that all bets are off if the grape is local turned out to be deeply flawed. Ever a believer in relying on local wisdom and lore, I put myself in the hands of the natives and ended up with something called a Francesinha. It was a doorstop of a sandwich: roast beef, ham, and several spicy sausages, all topped with gooey melted cheese and a fried egg. It was like a Croque Monsieur had gone berserk. It hit my system hard, but it did the trick.

The Francesinha is Portugal's interpretation of the fat+protein+spice approach to a culinary hangover cure. Canadians offer poutine, that glorious blend of French fries, cheese curds, and gravy. Hawaiians swear by "Loco Moco," a big rice bowl topped with a greasy meat patty, several fried eggs, and gravy. These are all very laudable, but for my money, each lacks the Russian element of sour/salty that makes a hangover cure really effective, particularly when combined with a good long sweat in the banya.

This week's dish combines these elements: fat+protein+spice+sour+steam into a soup that delivers almost instant relief for anything that ails you, from morning-after to a bad head cold. This is kapustniak, or sauerkraut soup, which is popular in all its forms throughout Eastern Europe. Similar to shchi, or cabbage soup, kapustniak's base is fermented cabbage and a hearty broth made from smoked or salted meats such as bacon, *salo*, or ham hocks. This smokey underpinning makes for a marvelous contrast with the sour tang of the fermented cabbage and a hint of sweetness from the tomatoes in the broth.

This is a recipe that invites adaptation and improvisation once the key elements are in place. I use a combination of spices to enhance the flavor, allowing smoked paprika to dominate. Allow this soup to rest overnight so that the flavors can develop. Then stick it in the fridge for that inevitable moment when you — or someone you love — needs a pick me up. Relief will be yours in a moment.

Ingredients

- 10 oz (300 grams) smoky bacon or *salo*
- 1 pound (500 grams) kielbasa (ideally spicy, smokey, and garlicky) sliced into ½-inch half moons
- 1 large yellow onion
- 4 cloves garlic, finely minced
- 5 medium-sized carrots, peeled and sliced into thin matchsticks
- 3 medium-sized parsnips, peeled and sliced into thin matchsticks
- 3 cups (710 ml) sauerkraut, including juice
- 2 Tbsp tomato paste
- 1 Tbsp prepared horseradish
- 12 ounces (350 grams) chopped tomatoes
- 2 tsp coriander seeds
- 3 tsp smokey paprika
- 2 tsp caraway seeds
- 1 tsp juniper berries
- 3 quarts (3 liters) chicken or beef stock

- Fresh dill or parsley for serving

Preparation

- Sauté the bacon in a large soup pot or Dutch oven until most of the fat is rendered. Discard all but 2 Tbsp of the rendered fat. Add the kielbasa half-moons and sauté for 3 minutes.
- While the meat is frying, toast the juniper berries, paprika, caraway seeds, and coriander seeds in a small skillet over medium low heat for 2 minutes until the flavor amplifies. Grind them in a spice grinder and set aside.
- Remove the bacon and kielbasa with a slotted spoon to a plate lined with paper towel. Discard all but one tablespoon of the rendered fat. Return the pot to medium heat and sauté the onions and garlic until they are limp and just beginning to brown. Add the carrots and parsnips and toss to combine. Sauté for 3 minutes until the vegetables soften.
- Add the tomato paste to the pot and toss to coat the vegetables evenly. Add the toasted and ground spices to the pot and sauté for 2 minutes. Add the chopped tomatoes and horseradish, then lower the heat and simmer, using the back of a wooden spoon to scrape up any bits on the bottom of the pot.
- Add the sauerkraut and its juice to the pot, along with the bacon/salo and the stock. Bring the mixture to a low simmer, cover, and cook for 45 minutes. Let the soup sit, uncovered overnight, to allow the flavors to develop. Garnish with generous amounts of fresh dill before serving.

Adaptations

There are many ways to improvise with this soup. To make it vegetarian, omit the meat, and use vegetarian stock, and perhaps substitute mushrooms or lentils for more flavor and heft. Polish and Baltic versions of this soup use potatoes rather than parsnips, and some versions add barley or farro. There are plenty of versions of this soup without tomatoes, but I think the contrast with the smokey meat, and the tangy cabbage works very well.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/11/20/kapustniak-the-hangover-soup-a75615