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Ring in the Old New Year With a Jewel-Studded Dish

East and West never came together so deliciously.

By Jennifer Eremeeva

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If you are a completist, you get two shots at New Year's resolutions in Russia. Classic New Year — December 31 — is a blockbuster holiday, celebrated in fine fashion with presidential toasts, fireworks, mayonnaise-y salads, champagne, and tangerines. Then there is January 13, known as "Old New Year," celebrated in quieter fashion by Orthodox Christians, whose liturgical calendar, based on the outdated Julian calendar, lags 13 days behind the rest of the world. Russians, who are nothing if not holiday-inclusive, celebrate both. And why not? What could be better than getting a second shot at (re) committing to those New Year's Resolutions? Because, let's be honest, we've probably already failed to keep most of them!

Old New Year marks the official end of the marathon holiday season in Russia: the Christmas tree comes down, kids head back to school, businesses reopen, and there is a general return to

the regularly scheduled programming. I for one welcome Old New Year with unbridled enthusiasm! I like the holiday season as much as the next person, but after three weeks of uninterrupted merriment, I pant for a return to normalcy.

One of my (many) New Year's resolutions for 2022 is to swap out "bad" starches such as pasta and potatoes in favor of healthier whole grains and pulses. I managed the straightforward part of any dietary resolution: I shopped for the ingredients and now have a pantry heaving with quinoa, farro, lentils, and other healthy grains. But between eating up the leftover holiday food and the flurry of celebrating Russian Christmas, haven't started the regime yet. To celebrate Old New Year in style, I took all the remaining butter, cheese, and ham in and made a truly decadent Mac & Cheese with truffle hot sauce, and advised the household to enjoy it, because as of January 14, we would be on the whole grain regime.

I expected a certain amount of pushback from my Russian husband, whose answer to "what would you like with your chicken, darling" is always and ever "potatoes." I contemplated how to inaugurate the new regime, mindful that things were already quite tense between Americans and Russians, who faced off this week in Geneva and Brussels over NATO, Ukraine, and general disagreements about global world order.

I attempted an entente recipe for the first whole grain meal of the year, with a firm family favorite that combined excellent ingredients from both America and Russia: wild rice and beets. This is a match made in heaven, particularly when enhanced by a healthy citrus vinaigrette and some crunchy almonds and fresh dill to finish it.

Known as *dikhy riz* in Russian, and *zizania palustris* in Latin, wild rice is actually the seed of a tall aquatic grass, native to the northern regions of North America. Slim and almost jet black when raw, wild rice softens, opens, and curls when cooked, taking on other shades of brown, white, and almost ivory. It is both gluten free and an excellent source of protein, dietary fiber, and key minerals.

Cooking wild rice can be frustrating for the uninitiated. The ratio of rice to water is officially 1:1-¼, but often simmering for a long time over low heat requires a top up, so you have to keep your eye on the rice as it cooks. Wild rice simmers much longer than plain rice — up to 50 minutes — and is done when the grains have burst open. But it's worth the wait for the complex nutty flavor of wild rice, which pairs beautifully with all kinds of vegetables from delicate leafy greens to dense roasted root vegetables. This week's recipe lets the rice and the dressing hang out together for at least 2 hours: wild rice is very absorbent and will soak up the dressing as it cools. Just before serving, I add the remaining ingredients and toss to combine. It's a salad that is easy to prepare in advance and one that keeps well for several days in the fridge.

This salad is an old friend: I've been making some version of it for decades. I've riffed on it in all kinds of ways, depending on the season: in summer young peas and their shoots, radishes, arugula, and bell peppers make a wonderful crunch, while in winter, beets, roasted butternut squash, ginger-glazed carrots, or thinly shaved fennel work equally well. Nuts and/or dried fruit provide an interesting contrast to the other textures. Sometimes I make just the rice and its dressing and keep it on hand in the fridge to add to weeknight green salads. This is the perfect side for chicken, beef, pork, ham, or salmon, and pairs really well with any tangy

cheese such as ricotta salata, halloumi, or goat cheese. I often bring this salad to parties, where it is always a hit, not only because of its glistening jewel tones but also because it is the perfect choice for vegans or anyone trying to avoid gluten.

Wild rice salad may not bring about better understanding between Russians and Americans, but it is certainly a great way ring in the (Old) New Year and your (re) renewed commitment to healthy eating with the perfect blend of excellent ingredients from both sides of the argument.

Ingredients

- 4 large golden beets*
- 2 cups (475 ml) uncooked wild rice
- Juice and zest of 2 lemons and one Blood orange (about ½-cup of juice)
- ¾-cup (175 ml) olive oil
- 2 Tbsp sherry vinegar
- 2 Tbsp honey
- 2 tsp salt
- 1 Tbsp sumac
- ¾-cup (175 ml) slivered almonds, lightly toasted
- 1 bunch scallions, sliced on the diagonal
- 1 bunch fresh dill, snipped
- ⅔-cup (155 ml) pomegranate seeds to garnish (optional, but it completes the jewel-toned theme)

Instructions

- Preheat the oven to 450°F/230°C. Wrap the beets in a foil pouch and roast them for 40 minutes or until the tip of a knife slides in easily. Allow the beets to cool to room temperature, then peel them and dice into small cubes.
- Cook the rice with 2-½ cups (590 ml) of water until the grains have opened (45-50 minutes on the stove or 30 minutes in a pressure cooker).
- While the rice is cooking, whisk together the citrus juice, olive oil, honey, salt, sumac and sherry vinegar.
- Decant ½-cup (120 ml) of the dressing and set aside. Toss the cooked rice with the remaining dressing. Cover loosely with a towel and set aside for 2 hours. The rice will absorb the dressing as it cools to room temperature.
- Toss the beets and almonds into the rice, using more of the dressing if needed, then gently fold in the scallions and dill. Top with pomegranate seeds. Serve at room temperature.

**Use any beets you like in this salad: I like golden beets because their color contrasts so well with the wild rice, but also because they do not stain as much as their purple cousins.*

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