

The History and Mystery of Beef Stroganoff

Everyone around the world knows Beef Stroganov. But no one knows where it came from.

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Everyone knows the dish called "Beef Stroganoff." But its history is less well known, although no one disputes that the dish belongs to the Stroganov family. But it didn't appear out of nowhere, did it? Nothing ever does, not in the kitchen or in history.

Why is this dish so popular? First, it's relatively easy to prepare, doesn't require complex culinary skills and doesn't have a long list of ingredients. Second, its delicious flavor can be appreciated by everyone, regardless of the sophistication of their culinary taste or lack thereof. Third, its flexibility: tenderloin can easily be replaced by rump roast, beef by liver and tomatoes by the Soviet sauce "Yuzhny." Perhaps that's what makes it a very Russian dish. It's

not Russian because we can use whatever we have on hand to make it; it's Russian because that's our life and history.

But the history of the dish is more complicated. First of all, let's try to determine which Stroganov we are talking about. This dynasty is one of the most famous in the history of Russia. Beginning in the second half of the 15th century, Stroganovs have been part of the business, administrative and military elite of the country.

Let's begin with the most authoritative hypothesis. Alexander Grigorievich Stroganov (1795–1891) was for a long time Governor-General of “Novorossia.” He lived and died in Odesa, where he was elected an honorary citizen of the city after his retirement. An exceptionally wealthy man, Stroganov kept an “open table” in Odesa in accordance with the customs at the time. This meant that any educated or decently dressed person could come in for dinner right “off the street.” For these such open tables one of Stroganov's cooks — not Stroganov himself — invented a kind of hybrid Russian–French dish: small pieces of meat, fried and served in a sauce. That is, the sauce wasn't served separately for the meat but served together with it, almost like a Russian stew. The dish was easy to make consistently, was easy to divide into portions, and was absolutely delicious.

This version fits with the time “Beef Stroganoff” or “Stroganoff Meat” was mentioned in Russian sources. We first encounter it in Elena Molokhovets's “Gift for Young Housewives” in the 1870s, which came out more than a dozen years after Stroganov had been governor. That was enough time for news of this new dish to reach the capital.

And yet we can't help thinking that the recipe is much older. According to the French culinary encyclopedia “Larousse Gastronomique,” similar dishes have been known since the 18th century. As for the name “Stroganoff,” it is attributed to Charles Briere, a chef working in St. Petersburg, who sent the recipe to “L'Art Culinaire” magazine in 1891 (the year of Stroganov's death).

Another version of history links the dish to Grigory Alexandrovich Stroganov (1770–1857). According to the recollections of his contemporaries, he was a great gourmand. His chef created an original dish for the count made of minced meat. Gossips said that it was invented when Stroganov was in old age and had “lost all his teeth and could no longer chew meat cooked the usual way.”

Other sources attribute it to Pavel Alexandrovich Stroganov (1774–1817) for similar reasons. This Stroganov was a famous diplomat in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Many memoirs and sources say that either he or his chef invented the dish. Legend has it that when he was in the Siberian countryside, the Count's cook discovered that the meat was so frozen that only very thin strips could be cut from it.

Was mundane truth was sacrificed for the sake of a good story? It's possible. But note that in the recipes for Beef Stroganoff published in the late 19th century — and there are many, not just in Molokhovets's cookbook — the dish is described as made with long, thin pieces of beef. Cookbooks specified “the way beets are cut for borshch” — that is, julienned.

On the other hand, there is also a recipe for Beef Stroganov that isn't made with julienned strips, but with thin “petals” of beef. The easiest way to make them is by slicing a frozen piece

of meat. If you have a good, sharp knife, you can achieve the same result with fresh sirloin, but you have to work hard and skillfully to make the strips as thin as possible. When the meat is so thin, the dish is really tender.

At this point you might think that the recipe had been prepared in the Stroganov family and by their friends for many, many years. That would neatly explain the references to several generations — so everyone was right. There were probably stories in the family about how their grandfather cooked a particular meat dish, and how their great-uncle in frigid Siberia came up with another way of preparing it. For a while the dish was known only in the circle of relatives and friends. But in the 1870s the recipe spread far and wide due to two circumstances. First, society went through a phase of rediscovering traditional Russian cuisine after being somewhat weary of foreign cuisines. And second, publishing companies began to print mass editions of the best recipes and send them all over the country.

Finally, there is one more question to be answered. Was this recipe truly invented out of thin air? We spent a lot of time carefully flipping through many old cookbooks looking for a similar recipe from an earlier time. We looked for small pieces of beef in a sour cream sauce.

What did we find?

We found two dishes among the thousands of recipes from the 18th and 19th centuries that might have been predecessors of Beef Stroganoff. One is for minced beef, simply called “mince.” In the “Chef's Calendar” of 1808 it reads: “Finely chop a tender piece of beef. Cut the pieces into oblong wafers. Fry in butter, add broth to stew. Add spices, vinegar and sour cream; serve.”

Another candidate for Beef Stroganoff is a dish called “klops.” It is made with 4–5 cm (1–2 inch) pieces of meat that is not breaded but lightly pounded. This meat is fried and stewed with onions, and it is served with either pan drippings or sour cream.

Of course, we don't claim that these dishes are very similar to Beef Stroganoff. Any experienced home cook will spot all the differences. But our point is that Beef Stroganov didn't appear out of nothing but was a new version of some respectable and widespread predecessors. It wasn't a culinary revelation even for 18th century cuisine.

By the Soviet era this dish was equally successful both in our country and abroad, spread all over the world by the post-revolutionary Russian emigration.

Resourceful home cooks are still experimenting with it to this day. For example, they substitute liver for beef, making lovers of variety meats very happy — or add carrots to sweeten the sauce, to the delight of many diners. If you add prunes, you get a version close to the Jewish dish Esik-Fleish: sour-sweet meat. Melted cheese, wine and nutmeg will be appreciated by gourmets, although these ingredients were not used in the classic recipe.

We add a bit of Asian flavor to this old dish. After all, if Count Stroganov's chef had had mushrooms and Worcestershire sauce on hand back then, 150 years ago the dish might have been similar to ours. History doesn't like “ifs.” But unlike history, we like to try all the “ifs” that we can.

Ingredients

- 500 g (1.1 lbs) beef (sirloin, tenderloin, rump)
- 2 medium onions
- 200 g (1 ½ c or 7 oz.) mushrooms (champignons, white, shiitake)
- 1 Tbsp flour
- 200 g (¾ c or 7 oz.) sour cream or crème fraîche
- 1 Tbsp Worcestershire sauce
- 2 Tbsp melted butter
- Salt and pepper

Instructions

- Cut the meat into 1 cm (about half-inch) slices, lightly pound, then cut into julienne strips.
- Slice the onions into half-circles, but don't make them very thin.
- Slice the mushrooms.
- Heat the butter in a frying pan and sauté the meat for about 5 minutes. The meat should be well fried on all sides. If there is a lot of meat, sauté it in small batches, moving it with a fork, and season with salt and pepper. At the end add flour, sauté for 1 minute and then remove from the pan to a plate.
- Add more butter to the pan and add onions. Sauté for 5-6 minutes and add the chopped mushrooms. Cook all together for 5 minutes.
- Return meat to pan, add sour cream or crème fraîche. Add the Worcestershire sauce, stir and bring to a boil.
- Reduce heat and cook over low heat for forty minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste and stir occasionally. If the sauce is too thick, add some broth.
- Serve with fried or mashed potatoes.

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