The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Shulyum By Any Other Name is a Rich and Delicious Soup

By Russian Culinary Historians

November 30, 2024



Courtesy of authors

“Scratch a Russian and you’ll find a Tatar” is a well-known phrase that has been attributed to everyone from Pushkin to Dostoevsky.

But the saying “Grattez le Russe, et vous verrez un Tartare” came to us from France, where it was also a popular expression at one time. But more importantly, it more accurately conveyed the meaning, since when the expression appeared, a “Tatare” meant “a native of Asia.”

Today where you still find Asia in Russia is in the kitchen. Asian cuisine has had a great influence on Russian cuisine. Siberian pelmeni (dumplings) became Moscow pelmeni. Plov turned in kulyosh — rice porridge with meat cooked in the oven. And shulyum appeared, a soup that has been popular among many nationalities from Mongolia to the Black Sea.

We confirmed this during a recent trip to Buryatia. The purpose of our trip was quite unusual

— we wanted to attend the “Cuisine of the Great Khan Festival.” The festival was based on a historical document — a book from the 14th century.

The book was written by the court physician of the ruling Chinese emperor at the time, Tugh Temür. During that period the food served at the Chinese Court was Mongolian cuisine, which is quite heavy and rich. But the illness of the emperor's wife required a change from the traditional cuisine to a lighter and healthier diet. The book is a collection of recipes invented and recommended by the court doctor. That was the idea behind the festival — to take a few recipes and adapt them to today's tastes.

Several Buryat restaurants took on the challenge — to try to imagine the old taste and convey the spirit and mood of the distant past while satisfying current tastes at the same time. Each restaurant prepared three old recipes from the book.

Cold buttermilk soup with fried fish, broth made from Buryatian *borgoy* lamb and pine nut “milk”; all kinds of manty (a kind of dumpling) presented in an original way that surprised us, especially one with mandarin orange and zest; pearlescent noodles; noodles made from barley flour. The flavors and character were completely unique, impossible to confuse with anything else. These were the flavors of Asia, of Mongolia.

As it turned out, you *can* take recipes made several centuries ago and prepare them today in modern interpretations that meet the requests for light cuisine.

One of the most memorable dishes was a scalding hot thick soup — served with red-hot stones — made with barley and the meat of the famous *borgoy* lamb.

Khushuur, shulen, khirmasa... these are names of dishes that you, like us, had never heard before. But the name shulen reminded us of the name of a dish we knew from other regions called shulyum. What does the name mean? In the Buryat language “shulen” is soup, broth. Buryat is one of the Mongolian family of languages, where “shel” is also a soup, broth. It is reasonable to conclude that shulyum moved to us from Asia, specifically Mongolia. And because it was the food of nomads, real shulyum was certainly cooked in a cauldron over an open fire.

Shulyum is cooked by Cossacks on the Don River and by people in the North Caucasus. And people in the Southern Urals also call it their own national dish. Is there something uniting these regions in their love for this simple soup? Or maybe everything is even more complicated, and dishes similar to shulyum exist under other names?

Apparently, this is how the rich soup moved from the expanses of Mongolia through Siberia, the Southern Urals to the Lower Volga and Don, the North Caucasus, and the Black Sea region. There was a simple exchange of culinary knowledge among different peoples as a result of the Tatar-Mongol invasion.

So what is shulyum? It is a meat broth that has a deep, rich flavor. Vegetables are secondary, — which ones are used depend on the region where the soup is cooked.

And then it gets really interesting. A rich broth with vegetables is also known to many people as the Uzbek soup called shurpa, which is made with onions, potatoes, carrots, peppers and

tomatoes. Chickpeas are always put in nokhut shurpa. Very similar is the Tadjik soup shurbo; fatir-shurbo, is served with crumbled puff pastry. Chechnya has a traditional soup made of mutton and vegetables called zhizhigan-chorpa. As you can see, not only the names are similar — the recipes are, too.

There are also similar terms in the culinary dictionaries of other nations that have been influenced by Turkic languages. There is sorba in Azerbaijan, shurpe in Chuvashia, and even in Moldova there is a similar dish called chorba. What unites them is not so much the recipe as the sound of the word. It is clearly of Arabic origin, meaning “soup,” “broth,” or “chowder.” Some experts believe that it has even older Sanskrit roots.

Let's start with the origins and imagine how the nomads used to make their thick, rich shulyum. Horse meat was the most common meat among nomadic peoples. After that, mutton or lamb was always at hand. Beef was less common. Sometimes game birds were used. The tradition of making the broth for shulyum from the meat of these animals is still preserved to this day. But even today horse meat remains the main meat used for shulyum in Buryat cuisine. The traditions of Mongolia do not die.

For others who like to cook soup over a fire, mutton or beef is a good choice. Friends from Rostov-on-Don told us how Don Cossacks traditionally cook shulyum: “Don Cossacks are very conservative in food in general, and so the only shulyum they consider authentic is their Cossack shulyum made of mutton with potatoes and quite a lot of onions. Sometimes and with great reluctance they’ll allow the addition of tomatoes, carrots and sweet peppers. But cabbage, zucchini, eggplant, pumpkin — never. Grains are not even considered; if you add them, it's no longer shulyum. The simpler the better: in an ideal Cossack shulyum there should be nothing but meat on bones, onions, a handful of salt and steppe herbs. And water.”

Let's not forget that shulyum is basically a dish for camping trips — of all kinds. And what is a camping trip without meat cooked over a fire? So the meat for shish kebab was first cut off the bone, and the bones and all the meat unsuitable for grilling were used to make a rich broth. Rational approach!

There are many recipes for shulyum, and, as always, each host or hostess will claim that their recipe is the most correct. Someone will fry the meat before cooking broth; another will splash in half a glass of vodka. Probably the most delicious soup will be cooked over warm coals. But even on the stove in a cauldron or a pot with thick sides you can make a tasty, rich shulyum.

Here is our favorite version of shulyum, made with lamb and lentils.

For 5-6 servings:

Ingredients

- 500 g (1 lb) lamb ribs
- 100 g (3.5 oz or ½ c) red lentils
- 2 potatoes
- 1 celery stalk
- 2 garlic cloves
- 2 tomatoes

- 1 small hot pepper
- 1 bunch of parsley
- 5 Tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 onion
- 1 small carrot
- salt, bay leaf

Instructions

- Rinse the lentils until the water becomes transparent. Peel the potatoes and chop them coarsely. Cut the celery at an angle into 2 cm (1 inch) slices. Peel and dice the tomatoes. Cut the hot pepper in half and remove the seeds.
- Chop the onions and carrots and lightly sauté in a frying pan in 2 Tbsp of vegetable oil.
- The best pot for cooking this soup is not enamel, but something like a metal cauldron with thick sides. Heat the remaining oil in the bottom of the pot and sauté the lamb ribs until lightly browned — about 4 minutes. Add potatoes, celery, pepper, bay leaf and garlic — not all the pepper, just a few pieces according to your taste. It will be spicy. Sauté everything together for about 5 minutes. Pour in 1.5 liters (1.5 quarts) of water, bring to a boil, and cook over low heat until the potatoes are half cooked.
- Then add the sautéed onions and carrots, and tomatoes. Bring to a boil and then add the lentils. Cook on medium heat for another 10 minutes. Add chopped parsley and remove from heat. Be sure to take out the bay leaf! Let the soup stand for about 15 minutes. All in all, making this soup will take anpit 90 minutes.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/11/30/shulyum-by-any-other-name-is-a-rich-and-delicious-soup-a87182