

# Dress Your Herring in Fur for Your New Year's Party

By [Russian Culinary Historians](#)

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AI Herring Under a Fur Coat. **Courtesy of authors**

“Herring under a fur coat” might be one of the most famous dishes in all of Russia, but we don’t have any reliable information about its history.

The most appealing story about an innkeeper who invented the dish to reconcile passions in post-revolutionary Petrograd is just a fairy tale.

This story goes like this: At the end of 1918, the merchant Anastas Bogomilov, who owned inns in Moscow and Tver, decided to develop a new dish to reconcile the opposing political groups who frequented his establishments. There were always fights breaking out either over politics or just too much to drink.

Chef Aristarkh Prokoptsev came up with a symbolic salad. In this salad the herring represented the proletariat, the potatoes were the peasants, the beets were the “red”

Bolsheviks and mayonnaise represented the “whites” — the bourgeoisie resisting the new government. The name was as complicated as the flavors and their vegetable and fish representation. Allegedly SHUBA (шуба-fur coat) is an abbreviation of the Russian words for “Boycott and Anathema to Chauvinism and Decadence.”

Many culinary innovations become the stuff of myth and legend. In this case, the myth-making is also a testament to the nation's love for the little masterpiece of a nameless Soviet housewife.

The recipe, supposedly invented shortly after the revolution, was for some reason ignored by the authors of many Soviet cookbooks. Herring under a fur coat is not mentioned by the compilers of “The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food” — not in the first edition of 1939 or in any subsequent editions. It only appeared in the 1980s version.

And the ridiculous revolutionary legend was made up by some journalist or blogger in the 2000s.

But this dish didn't appear out of nowhere. You can find similar dishes with herring in Scandinavian cuisine in the late 19th century, but they only remotely resemble this Soviet recipe. There was nothing like the layers of potatoes, herring, and mayonnaise before. Now old traditions somehow were combined with new products and flavors.

Many people assumed that “herring under a fur coat” was just a combination of two traditional dishes put together: mixed root vegetable salad with herring and Salad Olivier with mayonnaise.

In any case, even when there were severe food shortages Soviet housewives could make this festive dish out of plain old potatoes, beets and always-available herring.

But if you think about it, this is the perfect combination: sweet beets and salty herring. You could even make it the simplest way — herring, beets, onions and mayonnaise.

That version is called “herring under a fur jacket.”

In the 1970s, the dish rapidly spread throughout the USSR as a homemade salad. In those days, it was never served in public eateries. At about the same time when mayonnaise began to be produced on a mass scale, home cooks began to dress this mixed salad not only with vegetable oil, but also with Soviet-style “Provençal mayonnaise.” This was actually a great combination of flavors.

### **Herring under a fur coat begins with the choice of herring**

What kind of herring should you buy? Salted herring only — no herring in a spicy marinade. But the herring must be lightly salted. If the herring is too salty, the meat will be spongy. (If you buy that kind of herring, use it to make *vorschmack*.) For herring dressed in a fur coat, you need firm herring, which means lightly salted.

So how can you tell how salty it is? Look at the eyes. Herring that has been lightly salted recently will have red eyes that are clear and not dull. The darker the eyes, the saltier the fish.

The fish should have a thick, wide back — these are “boy herrings,” which taste better than “girl herrings.” There should be no visible bruising or damage, with intact fins and tail. Touch it: the body should be dense and elastic, the scales silver and shiny. And be sure to look at the gills. They should be dark red, not damaged. If everything looks good — that’s the fish to buy.

### **How to cut herring**

For this dish you want a piece of flavorful fish that you can hold on your fork. So you need to cut herring in thin slices — but not too thin. The flavor of herring should stand out. After all, the herring is just one ingredient in this salad, and the flavor shouldn’t get lost.

### **Other fur coat ingredients**

The second main ingredient after herring is beets. The beets can be boiled or roasted, although oven roasting is preferable. Should you chop them or grate them coarsely? It’s a matter of taste. If you choose to chop them, make sure you chop them into small pieces.

Grated beets hold together better in the layers.

For the next vegetable — carrots — you should use the same technique as did with the beets. Boil them until tender and then dice into small cubes or grate coarsely as above.

Boiled potatoes are essential. Buy waxy “salad” potatoes that are low in starch. Boil them without peeling; they taste better that way. Cool, peel, slice or grate to match the beets and carrots. All the vegetables should be uniform.

Onions are also part of the fur coat, but the amount is according to your taste. They should be finely diced and not too strongly flavored. If they are sharp and bitter, pour boiling water over them for a few seconds. Drain the hot water and rinse the onions with cold water. Another technique is to spray them with some lemon juice or cover them with apple cider vinegar, a pinch of salt and sugar. Let them stand for about 15–20 minutes. Then rinse well.

Boiled eggs on top: essential. Grate or mash finely with a fork.

Optional ingredients: grated apple, soft cheese and green onions.

Each layer in the salad plays a role in the color and taste of the dish. If you remove even one — carrots, for example — the salad will fade without its sunny color and sweetness. (As a last resort, you can add a few more beets instead of carrots.) If you don't like onions, a green apple will add freshness and crispness.

But still, the classic set of ingredients for herring under a fur coat is herring, onions, boiled beets, potatoes, carrots and eggs.

### **Proper layering**

Non-negotiable: the bottom must be herring and the top layer must be beets.

Logically, onions should go on top of the herring.

Next the boiled potatoes go on top of the onions, and then carrots and beets.

If you wish, you can repeat the layers in the same order.

Another option is to put grated boiled egg between the layer of potatoes and carrots and then sprinkle eggs on top.

How important is it to put the layers in this order? Could you, say, put potatoes as the bottom layer?

To answer that question, you need to understand how you taste food. You take a forkful of the salad, making sure you have a bit of everything. The herring at the bottom is the first thing you taste, and it establishes the flavor and character as the salty herring hits the tip of the tongue. Everything else is garnish for that salty bit of herring: the sharp onions, soft potatoes and up to the sweet beets on top. Everything depends on the first bite that hits the tip of the tongue.

### **Dressing your salad**

Traditionally the salad is dressed with mayonnaise. Russian mayonnaise is usually sold in packets, and you cut off the corner and squeeze the mayonnaise to crosshatch the layer of onion, then potatoes and beets: herring-onions-mayonnaise-potatoes-mayonnaise-(eggs)-carrots-beets-mayonnaise-eggs. Then spread mayonnaise generously over the top.

You can use sour cream or yogurt, seasoning them with mustard, salt, a pinch of sugar, black pepper to bring them closer in flavor to mayonnaise.

For a low-calorie option you can make mayonnaise out of white canned beans. Drain and save the water. Mash the beans in a blender with salt, sugar, lemon juice, mustard and vegetable oil. Then top up with the water from the can to the desired consistency and blend well again.

And, of course, there is nothing better than real homemade mayonnaise!

### **Layering in a cooking ring**

It's quite beautiful this way. You use the same order of layering as in a large salad, grating or dicing the vegetables finely. The only difference is that the layers should be thinner, and you must take care not to spread the mayonnaise close to the edges so that the layers are clearly visible when the ring is pulled off. You can add a thin layer of diced green onions along with grated boiled egg on top.

These are the traditional ways to serve the dish. Today the most adventurous home cooks roll up their fur coat in the Japanese style.

In Russian this is called sushi-shuba.

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