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The Eternal Allure of Georgian Fried Chicken

By Russian Culinary Historians

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Courtesy of authors

Not long ago we got into a discussion with some foreign journalists about "import substitution" and how we were slipping back into the period of the late USSR. And then we suddenly realized that the most popular Soviet dish has never been replaced or revived. And you can't make it today no matter how hard you try.

Russians love Georgian cuisine. Russians' appreciation for all things Georgian is nothing new. The entire 19th century was an era of getting to know Georgia. Even in the classical cookbooks of that era by Gerasim Stepanov and Ekaterina Avdeeva you can find occasional mention of strange words like "talma" (dolma) or "chekherme" (chikhirtma). The Russian language doesn't easily adopt such unfamiliar terms.

In Soviet times, Georgian cuisine was the queen of holiday feasts. Of course, the ethnicity of the Soviet leadership of the 1930-50s contributed a great deal to the fashion for Georgian

food. But one dish became a real hit of Soviet cuisine: chicken *tabaka*.

Back in the 19th century, there was no mention of chicken *tabaka* in any Russian cookbooks. Elena Molokhovets just mentions the dish in passing, without a recipe, in a reference to Georgian cuisine.

But in the USSR, this chicken spread its wings. It was the favorite dish on restaurant menus. This might have been largely because it was simple to prepare. For comparison, according to Soviet norms the best level six chef could only prepare and cook 60 cutlets per shift . But the norm for chicken *tabaka* was 3,000 per shift.

For some unknown reason at the end of the socialist period everyone argued about the proper pronunciation of the name: "taBaka" or "taPaka." Supporters of the second version cited the Georgian name of the frying pan "tapi" and insisted that the dish got its name from the pan it was cooked in. But while they were busy arguing, the chickens meant to be used in the recipe completely disappeared from the market, replaced by meaty but tasteless broilers. So for a while, all discussions of chicken *tabaka* were just theoretical.

If you think about it, there's nothing special about the dish. It's just fried chicken. But it's cooked in an original way. The chicken is cut down the middle of the breast, the bird is pounded flat and then fried under a heavy press. That's what keeps the meat tender inside with a crispy crust.

Professional cooks use special frying pans and have heavy cast-iron presses to weigh down the chicken properly. Over the years housewives in their kitchens found replacements for these special kitchen tools. Everything from water jars to old-fashioned irons have been used. Today there are even frying pans with a screw press that can be tightened to just the right height and pressure.

For perfectly crusty skin, chefs advise rubbing the chicken with just salt and pepper and then frying chicken *tabaka* only in butter. Other seasonings can detract from the delicate flavor of the young bird.

Today this dish can't be prepared the right way. A fat broiler is not right for it. And where are you going to find a muscular young little chicken that spent its short life running around on grass and eating worms?

Cooks who love this dish have come up with a variety of modifications: they experiment with marinades such as garlic, lemon, and sour cream. Or they cover the chicken in whatever spices they like, from a Georgian spice blend called *khmeli-suneli* to paprika. But one rule cannot be broken: you can use only young birds. Older chickens are categorically not suitable — you can't fry them properly, and you won't be able to achieve the authentic flavor.

Do you remember Alexander Galich, who sang: "I eat chicken *tabaka* and drank half a kilo of cognac"? He wasn't just a great poet — he could create vivid pictures of everyday life. For the lyrical hero of his song — a man who had spent 20 years in a Stalinist prison camp — chicken *tabaka* was the pinnacle of flavor and pleasure.

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This isn't strange at all. Georgian seasonings and dried herbs give many dishes an unforgettable flavor and character. Here we share a recipe that develops the theme of chicken *tabaka*, as it were. It's called Chicken *Shkmeruli*. The principle of the dish is simple: fry chicken in a skillet, add spices, and top it off with a tangy sauce.

Note: The recipe mentions "*utskho suneli*." This is one of the most popular and well-known Georgian seasonings, made from dried and ground blue fenugreek seeds and pods. Just-harvested fenugreek doesn't have much character, but after processing, the spice develops a nutty flavor. In European cuisine, it is just called fenugreek. Here's what noted culinary researcher Darra Goldstein writes in her book "The Georgian Feast":

"Fenugreek (*utskho suneli*) [*Trigonella coerulea*]. Dried and ground, fenugreek is an important component of the herb and spice mixture *khmeli-suneli*, and often a pinch is added independently to soups and strews. The Georgian name for fenugreek means "foreign aromatic"; mostly likely the spice was introduced from India. Dried fenugreek leaves can be bought in Indian food stores; grind them to a powder before using."

A simple recipe for fried young chickens: after they are fried, they are heated in milk or cream, resulting in a juicy and very flavorful bird.

Ingredients

for 2-4 servings

- 1 whole young chicken
- 30 g (1 oz or 2 ½ Tbsp) butter
- 1 tsp adjika
- 6 garlic cloves
- 1/2 tsp ground coriander
- 1/2 tsp *utskho-suneli* (fenugreek)
- 1 small bunch of fresh coriander (cilantro)
- 400 ml (1 2/3 c) heavy cream
- 2 Tbsp sour cream
- salt to taste

Instructions

- Wash the chicken and pat dry with a paper towel.
- Cut through the breast and flatten, pounding a bit with a kitchen hammer.
- Mix butter and ajika and rub the mixture on both sides of the bird. Leave for 20-30 minutes.
- Heat the oven to 190°C /375°F. Put the chicken on a baking tray and bake until cooked through, about 30-45 minutes (depending on the size of the bird). The chicken should browned and reach an internal temperature of 70°C /160°F°.
- The chicken can also be cooked in a frying pan, frying on both sides under a press (such as a small cast-iron skillet).
- Press the garlic through the press.

- Finely chop the cilantro.
- Grind the garlic, salt, ground coriander and *ukkho-suneli* together in a mortar.
- Mix the cream with the spices and sour cream.

- Cut the chicken into pieces and place in a skillet.
- Cover the chicken with the cream/sour cream mixture, sprinkle cilantro on top and heat over medium flame for 5 minutes. Serve.

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