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Azerbaijani Soup and a Greedy Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

By Russian Culinary Historians

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Courtesy of authors

One of the eternal disputes among Russians is whether shashlyk (shish kabob) should be made with lamb or pork. The debates are as passionate as the debates over whether the soup okroshka should be made with kvass or kefir.

Any attempts to cite history — such as “historically we didn’t eat lamb” — don't fly, since lamb and mutton have been part of the Russia diet for centuries.

But for some reason lamb brings out the thriftiness — if not outright avarice — of our compatriots. Even the Russian sovereign showed muttony greed.

Since medieval times, when foreign ambassadors were visiting the court in Moscow, by tradition the welcoming country provided their food. This is how embassies survived in many countries, and for good reason. Diplomatic missions lasted for years, and sending money or

food from, say, Vienna to Moscow in the Middle Ages was a Herculean task. And so at the Moscow court foreigners were provided with food and drink to their hearts' content.

But there were... issues.

It was perfectly normal to send lamb to foreign ambassadors. But it was very odd to require the embassy to return the sheepskin after they finished eating the meat. For example, in May 1493 Grand Duke Ivan Vasilievich (Ivan III) sent food to traveling Polish ambassadors along with a letter that explained that the per-day ration "for seven people — a ram but the sheepskin must be sent back, three chickens, four portions of ham, thirty eggs, sour cream ..." With all that generosity, the tsar's order required the return of the sheepskin. Why would the Poles need it? Meanwhile, the treasury enjoyed counting everything up.

This habit of thrift was characteristic of Russia at the time. In 1489 the Russian authorities demanded that the Nogai ambassador also return sheepskins: "The Grand Duke [Ivan III] sent Yushok the Scribe to the Nogai ambassador, and ordered him to give the ambassador two rams for food but return the sheepskins".

A century later, Ivan III's grandson also commanded that the ambassador of the English queen be treated to mutton. According to Ivan the Terrible's letter of August 7, 1583, he ordered a shipment from Vologda of "the best honey and beer from the lord [archbishop] of Vologda; and cows, and rams, and geese, and chickens from the local population." But they were too embarrassed to ask the English for the sheepskin back.

Where did this custom — that seems completely ridiculous today — come from? In that era all the mutton in Russia was the Romanov breed. And unlike the situation in the Caucasus, in Russia the value was less in the flavorful meat and more in the sheepskin that could make warm fur coats. So in that era sheep were less valued for their meat than for their coats.

Today when we choose meat at the market, we always ask the seller: where is the lamb from? Of course, the merchant doesn't always tell the truth. But even in appearance, mutton from Kalmykia or Dagestan differs considerably from Romanov mutton. We need southern lamb for this southern dish from Azerbaijan.

This soup is only made with lamb. Today it is not a problem to buy good meat, so go to a good market and buy the back leg of a young lamb, ask the butcher to bone it and then chop the bone. Buy mint and cilantro.

Buying cilantro is easy, but buying mint can be tricky. An honest and experienced mint seller will ask: "Do you want the mint for meat or tea?" Believe me, they know what they are talking about, and you will appreciate the difference.

For meat you need peppermint: its flavor and aroma are much richer. Of course, if there isn't any peppermint on sale, you can buy regular mint, but then you need to use more of it.

If you decide to cook the soup tomorrow, then today you need to soak the beans in cold water overnight. (You can also soak them for 5-6 hours before cooking.) Instead of small white beans you can use red beans or small green beans (mung beans). We prefer to use white beans, since their creamy consistency and flavor perfectly combine with the noodles.

About saffron: we use “real” saffron. But for this dish you can use Imereti saffron (culinary marigold petals), which is a powder from the dried flowers of *Tagetes patula*, the French marigold. Of course it is not the same as real saffron — it adds more color than flavor. But it is also much more affordable. And Imereti saffron is traditionally used in Georgian and Azerbaijani cuisine.

For 8-10 servings you need:

Ingredients

- 700 g (1 ½ lb) lamb for minced meat
- Lamb bones with meat (for broth)
- Scant cup of small white beans
- 4 small onions,
- 1 carrot
- 1 cup flour
- 3 eggs
- salt, peppercorns,
- 3 sprigs of mint, a bunch of cilantro, a pinch of saffron

Instructions

Soak (see above) the beans in cold water.

Make the broth with meaty bones of good young lamb. Add one onion and carrots. In 1 ½ to 2 hours you should have a clear, fragrant and rich broth. Remember to cook the broth uncovered on very low heat so that some bubbles rise lazily to the surface.

While the broth is cooking, don’t waste time: Make the noodles. Yes, the noodles must be homemade — store-bought will not do. We make them the way my grandmother used to — using just egg yolks. The noodles are dense and don’t fall apart in the soup even the next day. Separate the whites (make meringue from them later) from the yolks of two eggs. Pour flour into a bowl, mix the yolks with 1 Tbsp water and a pinch of salt, and pour into the flour. Knead the stiff dough, then wrap it in foil and leave it to rest for 30-50 minutes.

While the dough is resting, drain the water from the beans, pour in enough fresh water to slightly cover the beans and bring to a boil. Let them simmer until tender — about 40 minutes. When ready, drain the water and let them stand until needed.

Now it’s time to make the meatballs. You only need about 700 grams (1 ½ lb) lamb for meatballs, so there should be enough meat left on the leg bone for broth. Put it through a meat grinder. Finely chop 2 onions, mint and half of the cilantro. Add this to the minced meat, then 1 whole egg, salt and pepper (preferably freshly ground).

Stir with a fork and immediately form meatballs — not too small. Cover with foil and put them in the refrigerator.

There is a secret to cooking with saffron. Put the saffron in a mortar, add a little salt and grind it. The salt crystals will act as an abrasive and grind the saffron into powder. Then pour in 2 Tbsp of boiling water.

Now test the broth and salt as needed. It’s time to make the noodles. Roll out the dough so that it is very thin (you can use a pasta machine), sprinkle with flour and leave to dry for about 20 minutes. Then cut into strips 5-7 cm (1-2 inches) wide, stack them and cut through to make noodles. This isn’t difficult at all — just try it once and you’ll see.

By this time the broth should be ready. Take out the onions, carrots, bones and meat. Cut the meat off the bones into small pieces and put it back to the broth.

And then everything is very quick and simple. Bring the broth to a boil. Then put everything in all at once: the noodles, beans and meatballs. Bring it back to a boil and then immediately reduce the heat to a simmer (if you add the meatballs when the soup is at a rolling boil, the broth will turn cloudy). Cook for 8-10 minutes until the noodles and meatballs are ready.

Finally: the magic moment when the soup acquires its unique flavor. Just before serving pour in the saffron mixture into the soup through a strainer. Wait one minute and add the remaining chopped cilantro. Remove from the stove and let the soup rest for 10 minutes. It must rest! This is a rule for almost all soups and for many hot dishes too.

And that's it. Bon appétit!

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