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How a Singer, a Writer and a Cook Spent Their Vacation in 1916

By Russian Culinary Historians

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Courtesy of authors

The Fyodor Shalyapin House Museum in St. Petersburg has a rare and fascinating document on exhibit: a 96-page ruled notebook with almost a thousand recipes written by the great opera singer's personal chef, Nikolai Khvostov in 1916. Shalyapin was a connoisseur of good food and fine wine. Today we know who to thank for that.

Nikolai Khvostov was born in St. Petersburg on April 30, 1895. The son of a cook, when he was nine years old he was apprenticed to the French restaurant Cuba. His innate talent and diligence helped him quickly learn the skills and secrets of a chef.

In September 1915, the chef of the restaurant "Regina" recommended him for work in Shalyapin's home. At first the singer was skeptical. Later Khvostov recalled: "Fyodor Ivanovich looked at me and said, 'You're still young — can you cook?' Before I could answer he said, 'Well then, cook a test meal and we'll see'."

Shalyapin shouldn't have doubted him. The young chef had already mastered European and Russian cuisine. The singer enjoyed exquisite European dishes, but most of all he loved Russian food: *shchi* with *golovina* (sturgeon head) or mushrooms; fish soup; buckwheat porridge with homemade condensed milk....

The book "A Taste of History" published in 2012 by museum workers contains many interesting details about this "duet" of cook and singer. In Shalyapin's home Nikolai Khvostov found happiness: He met a young maid named Pelageya Vinogradova and soon married her. They lived together for more than fifty years until Khvostov's death in 1969. And they keep alive their memories of the house, its owner, the people who lived there and the friends who visited.

The Revolution of 1917 and the Civil War put the young cook to the test. It was impossible to buy good ingredients. They drank carrot tea and only had meat when it was the fee for a performance. Shalyapin felt guilty keeping on the chef if he could find a better paying job. In the summer of 1917 Shalyapin was on tour and wrote, "Nikolai! If you need anything at all — what you need, don't be shy and write me — and I'll be happy to help however I can. I can also provide you with a good recommendation, since I know you are an honest and conscientious man and employee." But Khvostov did not leave. He would stay with the artist no matter what, in both joy and sorrow.

In turn Shalyapin took care of Nikolai and his family. Shalyapin decided that the cook should be trained additionally to care for his wardrobe so that he could go on tour with the singer and receive a salary. Khvostov went abroad with Shalyapin in August 1921.

But he didn't only travel on concert tours. The archives of the Khvostov family has a travel certificate signed by the People's Commissar of Foreign Trade L.B. Krasin stating: "This document has been issued to People's Artist F. I. Shalyapin and his wardrobe assistant and dresser N.N. Khvostov to certify that I am sending these persons abroad to investigate what preparations must be done to resolve the practical issues connected with exporting Russian art."

Negotiations were successfully held with representatives of the United States and Great Britain. But more importantly, this tour brought a lot of money into the Fund to Aid the Hungry in Russia. Shalyapin visited Riga, Helsinki, London, Liverpool, New York, Chicago, Montreal, Boston, Philadelphia. And Nikolai Khvostov was with him everywhere. The two men only returned to Russian in March 1922.

And at the end of June 1922, Shalyapin set off from Russia on a long tour. He left, as it turned out, forever. He expected a tight schedule of performances in Europe and America. The artist again decided to take to his assistant Nikolai Khvostov and appealed to the authorities. The Commissariat of Public Education in September 1922 issued Khvostov a certificate to travel abroad.

In the summer of 1923, Shalyapin's tour was interrupted for rest and treatment. He settled in France on the coast in Normandy. Nikolai Khvostov returned to Petrograd and never went abroad again. In December 1923, Shalyapin wrote to Khvostov from New York: "Dear Nikolasha! I received your letter the other day, and on the third day I transferred you seventy-five dollars. I am very unhappy that you aren't with me in America, but to be honest it is

you — or rather your carelessness — that is to blame. You haven't written so much as a line to me since you left me to return to Russia. I have to say, my dear brother, that because I didn't know if you were coming or not, I was compelled to refuse your services so that I could hire someone else. But let us speak of the future. I say once again that I love you and have the highest regard for your honesty. I still keep thinking about how I might help you."

At the time Khvostov expected to return to his main specialty: cooking. This seems to be why he needed Shalyapin's confirmation that he had worked in his house for many years. In May 1924, Shalyapin wrote from a ship in the Atlantic Ocean: "I hereby certify that Citizen Nikolai Khvostov served as my cook and costumer from September 1915 to August 1923." Khvostov got a job as a cook in the employees' cafeteria at the Conservatory, and in 1933 began working at the Central Restaurant in Leningrad. His student, V. N. Bobrin, recalled with gratitude how patiently and attentively Khvostov taught young cooks and shared the secrets of the culinary arts. He spoke a great deal about his work for Shalyapin, describing the singer's extraordinary diligence and passion for singing.

But what about that book of recipes? Before the Revolution, in June 1916, Shalyapin went to Crimea and stayed in Foros at the estate of his friend, millionaire Konstantin Ushkov. Shalyapin agreed to write an autobiography called "Pages of My Life" with Maxim Gorky. Or rather, they agreed that Shalyapin would write and then Gorky would edit. The singer was in Crimea and persuaded his friend to come to Foros.

Of course, they needed a skilled chef to feed everyone on the estate, family and friends. Nikolai Khvostov came with Shalyapin, and at Foros he had the idea of compiling a book of recipes that were popular in Shalyapin's house.

In the end, it was a very productive stay in Foros. Shalyapin and Gorky wrote "Pages from My Life" and Khvostov put together a unique collection of recipes.

Here is one of those recipes.

Ingredients

- 1/2 apple
- 1 medium white daikon radish
- 4 hard-boiled eggs
- 2 medium potatoes
- paté
- lettuce leaves

For the dressing

- 1 Tbsp Dijon mustard
- 3 egg yolks
- 3 Tbsp white wine
- 2 tsp white wine vinegar
- 30 ml (generous 2 Tbsp) chicken stock
- 100 g (1/2 c) butter
- 1 tsp sugar

- salt to taste

Instructions

- Prepare the dressing: Pour the wine vinegar and white wine into a thick-bottomed saucepan, and bring to a boil over low heat. Cool.
- Add yolks and cold chicken broth, stirring with a whisk. Place over low heat and, stirring constantly without bringing to a boil, heat until thickened.
- Cut the butter into small cubes and add to the sauce in the pan. Whisk constantly until thickened.
- Season to taste with sugar, salt and mustard. Stir and cool the sauce.
- Boil unpeeled potatoes, cool, peel and cut into small cubes.
- Dice daikon radish, apple, 3 eggs. Cut one egg into quarters.
- Mix together the chopped potatoes, apple pieces, daikon, eggs; add salt and pepper to taste. Carefully mix in the dressing.
- Serve the salad on a bed of lettuce with paté and hard-boiled egg quarters.

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