

A Taste of Tradition

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Borscht

Ask people what comes to mind when they hear the word borscht and the responses are likely to include Russia, Ukraine, and red beets. German Russians brought the word borscht with them to the US. Did they bring the recipe?

Borscht Definition

Borscht (the German and English spellings, borsch the alternative) is a mildly tart, hearty Eastern European soup. Like many dishes with recognizable names, borscht brings with it variations, claims, and stories. To arrive at a more complete definition of borscht and to determine if German Russians brought the recipe, let's go back to its beginning.



Borscht Early History

In the beginning, borscht was made with *brsh* root, not red beet root. *Brsh*, common hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*), was, as the name suggests, fed to swine, although all parts (leaves, stems, roots) were also human food. In Slavic countries, *Heracleum sibiricum* was the *brsh* variety commonly used, but cow parsnip (*Heracleum maximum*) and related plants also made it into the soup pot. Typically in the spring peasants would gather tender *brsh* leaves to cook as greens and store the ivory colored tapering roots for winter soup.

Into the *brsh* pot went turnips, cabbage, onions, mushrooms, whatever vegetables were on hand. The soup, which probably originated in the Baltic region during the 14th century before spreading south and east, was *the* family meal and by adding more vegetables after daily servings, lasted a week. The earliest Slavic written reference to the plant and the soup is 1547.

Ukrainian Borshch

About the same time in history, botanical writings mention a somewhat protuberant reddish beet root growing in central Europe. By the end of the century, *Beta vulgaris* more closely resembled the fleshy, bulbous dark red root we know today.

When Eastern Europeans began adding beet to their standby soup is unclear, but it likely was used in concert with *brsh* before supplanting it, while the name, *borshch* (the Ukrainian and Russian spellings) remained. A long standing debate – did *borshch*, as we know it, originate in Ukraine or Russia? – is resolved. The oldest reference is to *borshch malorossisky* (an ancient name for Ukraine). With this and related information, Slavic scholars in the 20th century unequivocally stated (or conceded, depending on their attachment to this emotional issue) that *borshch* as we know it originated in Ukraine.

From its humble peasant origins, borscht appeared in the households of the middle classes and on the table of the elite. Its fans stretched from Imperial Russia (Catherine the Great and Alexander II), to the lithe *Dying Swan* ballerina Anna Pavlova, to the burly Soviet ruler Leonid Brezhnev. In Larisa Vasilevas' *Kremlin Wives*, Brezhnev's wife Viktoria had this to say about her Ukrainian born spouse and borscht: "Leonid Ivanovitch

loved my borsch. You know there are different kinds of Ukrainian borsch: cold, hot, Lenten, and with meat stock. For the first course, for the most part, we would have borsch— Ukrainian borsch; hot or cold. Nowadays I only cook borsch in vegetable oil – sunflower oil, we need lighter, Lenten food. But in those years I cooked borsch with beets, potatoes, cabbage, tomatoes, garlic, fatback [fresh pork from the animal’s back]; and, in addition, a nice piece of meat. I cooked “day-long borsch” for two, three days – it’s tastier when it can steep.” “*Borshch* and Soups,” a chapter title in *The New Ukrainian Cookbook* by food writer and cooking instructor Annette Ogrodnik Corona, conveys the respect Ukrainians have for the dish. Embedded in the title, however, is the rest of the story. According to Slavic scholar Nikolai Burlakoff, the word ‘soup,’ which became part of the Russian language during the time of Peter the Great, was initially used to refer to foreign pottages. It was not until the 19th century that people began to use the word for both Russian and non-Russian main dishes eaten with a spoon. However, soup was seen as inferior to *Borshch* and other hearty pottages, so it was common to reserve the word soup for a clear broth.

Borscht Geography

Ukraine has innumerable varieties of borscht with some interpretations identified by a city or region, including Kiev, Poktava, Odessa, and Lviv. Versions of borscht are enjoyed in European countries and regions with Slavic as well as Ashkenazi Jewish populations, including Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Israeli, Lithuanian, Moldovan, Montenegan, Polish, Romanian, and Slovene variations.

Borscht Ingredients

Vegetables most commonly added to *borshch* besides those mentioned by Viktoria Brezhnev are onions, carrots, parsley root, and celery root. Both parsley and celery root are common in European cooking but not readily available in US markets. The flavor of the tapering beige parsley root is a mix of carrot and stalk celery, while that of the gnarly brown celery root (celeriac) is a cross between stalk celery and parsley which explains the use of fresh parsley leaves and celery stalks in the US. Additional flavorings may include garlic, bay leaves, and fresh dill. A classic *borshch* includes kvass, a souring agent.

Borscht Preparation

In Old World style borscht, soup meat, bay leaves, salt, and peppercorns are simmered in a pot of water. Meanwhile, root vegetables are quickly cooked in a small amount of fat (usually animal) to deepen their flavor. In a separate pan, beets (julienned or diced), with a splash of vinegar to help retain their vibrant color, are cooked in a small amount of water. When the soup meat is nearly tender, shredded cabbage is added, followed by the braised root vegetables. The meat is removed from the pot and reserved to be eaten with horseradish on following days, or either served separately with the soup or diced and returned to the pot. The beets and chopped tomatoes are added last, giving them just enough time to be incorporated and heated. Purists claim by sampling a mere spoonful of the finished product, they can tell whether raw or braised vegetables were used. They label the former *borshchok* and reserve the word borscht for, what they consider, the properly made dish. Another Old World standard involved judging the soup’s consistency: if it was thick enough to keep the Ukrainian wooden spoon upright when plunged into its mass, it was acceptable.

Borscht Sour

Kvass, a slightly fermented homemade beverage, also used as a soup flavoring, gives borscht its characteristic tartness. Marta Pisetska Farley (*Festive Ukrainian Cooking*) notes that beet *kvas* (the Slavic spelling) is an essential ingredient. Her recipe for a meatless *borshch*, popular in the Kievan region in the 1830s, calls for 2 pounds of beets; a single carrot, parsnip, and turnip; 2 onions, 1/2 pound chopped mushrooms, and a quart of kvass. Usually made with beets, the kvass mixture needs to ferment for several days before it is ready for the soup pot. In some recipes, the acidity of a generous amount of tomatoes has replaced kvass. In others, a touch of vinegar, lemon juice, or citric acid powder is the souring agent.

Sorrel Soup or Green *Borshch*

Using Slavic soup terms appropriately gets more difficult with the appearance of a seasonal Eastern European green leaf soup. Sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*), a perennial herb native to Eurasia, has been gathered and cultivated for centuries - its arrow-shaped emerald green leaves valued for its acidity. It is commonly served as soup in European cuisines under various names (*Sauerampfer* in German, *szczaw* in Polish, *schav* in Yiddish, *oseille* in French), but decades ago, the Slavic version was dubbed Green *Borshch*. The label has endured. Even contemporary Slavic food writers use the terms although Old Russian cookbooks refer to it simply as Green Soup.

Russian Stove *Borshch*

Old World Slavs pre-cooked *Borshch* vegetables and simmered the dish for hours on the *pech* (huge masonry stove used for cooking, baking, and for heating the peasant's one room hut), which allowed *borshch* flavors to develop with slowly decreasing heat. Cooked slowly on top of the stove for up to three days as Viktoria Brezhnev described, or in the oven surrounded by gentle heat, the soup was delicious. Descendants of Old World *Borshch* makers have found that a slow cooker best replicates the taste and texture described in family lore.

Slavic *Borshch* Pot Meal

Kyra Petovskaya's description of mealtime while living with a large rural family in the first half of the 20th century (*Kyra's Secrets of Russian Cooking*) gives meaning of the ancient proverb, *borshch*, the center of everything.

"The main staple of their diet was borsch, which my hostess cooked almost daily in a pot of at least ten gallon capacity. At meal time, 12 to 15 of us would sit round this large pot, each with his own wooden spoon, waiting for the head of the family to start. Crossing himself piously several times, the head of the family would dip his spoon into the large pot. His wife would be the next, and so on down the line to the youngest child. It took me, a city-bred girl, a long time to get used to this manner of eating . . . I had to learn how to hold a piece of bread under my chin, as I saw the peasants do, to catch any drippings from the round, wide spoon, which was too big even for the biggest mouth."

***Borshch* and Religion**

With nearly 200 fast days per year, the Christian Orthodox Church had a profound influence on dietary habits of the faithful. In addition to isolated days, the most important of the prolonged fasts were the weeks before Christmas and Easter. Without meat, borscht got its flavor from vegetables, often an abundance of wild gathered mushrooms, and/or fish (sturgeon and carp were common). Vegetarian borscht, without the scoop of sour cream, was so entrenched in the culture that even during the Soviet Union era with its party mandated atheism, Viktoria Brezhnev could talk of Lenten borscht. In Poland, the vegetarian version served on December 24th, became Christmas Eve *Barszez* generations ago and remains a tradition.

Borshch* versus *Shchi

Russian soups are divided into several groups, depending on the dominate ingredient - cabbage, fish, and noodle, for example. When diehards include *Borshch* on the list, it resides there with cabbage soup and the other groups. *Shchi*, Russian Cabbage Soup, which is considerably older than *Borshch*, was a mainstay in Russian households everywhere - the poor grateful for the hot soup with its shredded cabbage (sometimes sauerkraut), the rich enjoying theirs studded with beef chunks. As a staple on the military menu in Czarist Russia, *Shchi* was made with and without meat, depending on encampment or campaign circumstances. The two soups, however, are easily and often confused. In *Russian Cooking (Time-Life Foods of the World Series)*, authors Helen and George Papashvily address the issue:

“Often it was hard to tell whether a soup was *borshch* or *shchi*. Some women kept a great pot constantly on the stove and tossed into it anything they happened to have on hand. If cabbage predominated, the soup was *shchi*; if it showed the red of beets, it was *borshch*.”

Borscht Hot or Cold

While steaming hot borscht comforts and satisfies during the winter months as well as cool spring and fall days, a cooked and chilled borscht not only refreshes on hot summer days, it keeps the kitchen temperature comfortable, an important factor in an era when the stove itself got hot, raising the temperature of the entire house. Not having to heat and supervise the soup, the family cook could do other chores in what was for her the busiest season. When borscht was first served cold is unclear, but it may have been relatively recent in the long history of the dish. Ukrainian and Jewish cuisine have versions of cold borscht; German Russian does not.

Borscht in America

In the 1800s, the word borscht (the Yiddish spelling) increasingly was heard in the New York City area as Eastern European Jews became residents. The soup was part of Passover cuisine, but was served on other occasions as well. The word borscht first appeared in print in 1829. Escaping pogroms and poverty, the trickle of Jews, especially those from Russia, became a great wave after 1880. Borscht remained a popular homemade dish, but soon working families had other sources - freshly made borscht from delicatessens and jarred borscht from grocery stores. Borscht by Gold's and Manichewitz is still available on market shelves, its crimson color gleaming through the clear glass containers. The word borscht had become part of the vocabulary and was so closely associated with Jews, the term Borscht Belt was coined in the 1930s as a synonym for the New York Catskill resorts that became a vacation spot for those escaping crowded tenements, sweatshops, and discrimination.

After the beet, the most important borscht ingredients, potatoes and tomatoes, both New World vegetables, did not enter the soup pot until the 19th century. The potato replaced the turnip, and the tomato, initially added in small amounts for the missing kvass, was so well received, it became a major ingredient in many families.

German Russian Borscht

Borscht is mentioned in histories of the Black Sea colonies and in memoirs. In *The German Colonies in South Russia*, Reverend Conrad Keller, a native of Colony Sulz near Odessa, lists borscht as one of several foreign dishes incorporated into the German cook's repertoire while in Russia. Pauline Neher Diede (born in 1911 to parents who emigrated from Russia to Mercer County, North Dakota) wrote about borscht in her books *Homesteading on Knife River Prairies* and *The Prairie was Home*. In addition to being simmered on the back lid on the “reliable Majestic,” as she called the iron cookstove, borscht was put into the waning heat of the oven after removing the last of the freshly baked bread loaves, a practice that harkens to the era of the Russian *pech*. Lest the reader misinterpret the family's menu and means, Diede added, “. . . one item for a meal was as much as we could expect: either bread or a kettle of borscht, not both.”

Germans imitated the Slavic practice of using soup meat and bones (usually beef cuts such as chunk, brisket, or ribs), cooking them with onion, a bay leaf, and often a touch of spice (usually allspice or whole cloves). They also added an array of vegetables, often including green string beans which were native to the Americas and enthusiastically cultivated in pioneer kitchen gardens. Many German Russian versions, however, use fewer beets and more tomatoes (often tomato juice) and cabbage than Slavic versions. Some recipes also call for a small amount of grain (rice or barley), a practice not unknown in Eastern Europe. German Russian borscht recipes leave out the kvass, the acidity of tomatoes being sufficient for most palates. When a souring agent is occasionally added by a German Russian cook, it is a spoonful of vinegar, a timid amount compared to the ample glug of kvass used by Farley.

A further difference between German Russian and Slavic borscht is the finishing touch: German Russians usually stir in a generous amount of sour cream before the soup is ladled while Slav cooks add a dollop of sour cream to the top of each bowl of soup without stirring.

“No, not BOHR sht, its bohr SHT,” a tri-lingual Russian-born German corrected me during an interview, pausing to make certain his point was understood. “And tell the readers we always eat *bohr SHT* with *Pampushki*.” The pronunciation (later confirmed by two other Russians) differs from that of German Russians in the US as well as English speaking culinary historians who use the first intonation. Bread is the final difference in a borscht meal: Slavs continue to serve Ukrainian Garlic Rolls while white bread slices or rolls were and remain common among German Russians.

Virtually all heirloom German Russian borscht recipes were blushed with tomatoes, buffered with cabbage, and bulked with meat. The meat was beef, ham, or chicken, in that order of importance. The fast days in the Roman Catholic Church were considerable (but far less than in the Orthodox faith) and occurred weekly on Friday and principally before Easter. Roman Catholic households saved the borscht for non-fast days. A vegetarian borscht was rare, one with fish, unheard of.

Many of the borscht recipes in German Russian cookbooks (*Food 'n Customs, Sei Unser Gast, Küche Kochen, Food 'n Folklore, Eureka Museum German Russian Pioneer*) are sub-titled Vegetable Soup. Originally prepared in summer and fall when fresh garden vegetables were available, home freezers and canned goods, both home and commercial, made German Russian borscht a year-round dish. Regardless of the season, borscht was always made in quantity using a 15 to 40 quart canner or a Dutch oven.

Black Sea Germans helped blur the line between borscht and *shchi* soup – many borscht recipes call for an abundance of cabbage. Even more noticeable is the Russian Mennonite practice of labeling many of their soups borscht (those with cabbage, sauerkraut, or sorrel as the main ingredient). Even a watermelon soup, favored by those who settled in Paraguay, is called borscht.

German Russians not only brought the word borscht with them they brought their South Russian recipes, expanding the already numerous variations of a soup served for ritual as well as everyday meals. Even though German Russian have been making borscht only since the 19th century, their contributions have enriched the pottage in its 500 year-plus evolution.

Borscht, a category of tart, chunky vegetable Eastern European soups, with the beet-based version, Classic Ukrainian *Borshch*, the most recognizable to people in general, is the basis for the numerous interpretations enjoyed by Slavs, Ashkenazi Jews, and German Russians, all who believe the version they grew up with is the best.

