KAUKASIS

A COOKBOOK

A culinary journey
through Georgia,
Azerbaijan & beyond

OLIA HERCULES

Ostriy

The Russian word for "spicy," *ostriy* the dish seems to be a Georgian adaptation of the Russian soup called *solyanka*, "the salty one." It used to be a canteen favorite during Soviet times and it clearly still is. I have seen this dish, and eaten excellent versions of it, in many colorful roadside cafés in Georgia with their gorgeously kitsch oilcloths, small dishes of chile flakes, and funky little salt and pepper shakers. Spicy, rich, salty, and with tons of raw onion and cilantro, it goes perfectly with a cold beer and . . . a sore head. I really wasn't sure which chapter to put this dish into, but on reflection it should probably have gone in the "Pain, be gone!" chapter, as this is one of the best things you can eat when feeling tender after a long, fun night. You could make it (omitting the gherkins) and freeze it, then pop a portion in the sink to thaw before you go out. The next day, simply add the gherkins when you reheat it, and you will be healed!

Serves 6–8

4½ lb (2 kg) beef ribs or shin

sea salt flakes

1 bay leaf

4 onions, 3 thickly sliced, 1 thinly sliced

1 tablespoon tomato paste

5 ripe, juicy large tomatoes, coarsely grated, skins discarded

1–3 long red chiles (depending on how hot you like it)

2 teaspoons coriander seeds, lightly toasted and ground

1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 teaspoon *khmeli-suneli* spice mix (see page 226)

2 Fermented Green Tomatoes (page 182) or gherkins

3 garlic cloves, crushed

½ bunch of purple or green basil, finely sliced

½ bunch of flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped

½ bunch of cilantro, leaves picked

Put the meat into a large pan and cover with plenty of cold water. Add a little salt and the bay leaf and bring to a boil. Skim off the scum, then reduce the heat to low and cook until the beef is tender and falling off the bone, 1½ hours. Skim off the fat and reserve it for later. Remove the meat from the pan, raise the heat, and cook the beef stock until reduced by half – you should end up with 2 cups (16 fl oz/500 ml) of stock.

Heat the reserved beef fat in a large flameproof casserole dish over medium heat, add the thickly sliced onions (reserve the thinly sliced onion for serving), and cook them until they soften and start taking on some color, about 10 minutes. Then add the tomato paste and cook for a further minute over high heat. Keeping the heat high, add the grated tomatoes and cook until reduced and concentrated, about 10 minutes.

Squash the whole red chiles with the back of your knife and add them to the tomato sauce. Then add all the spices, the meat, and the fermented tomatoes or gherkins. This is not a soup but a very saucy stew, so add half a ladleful of the reserved beef stock and then see if it needs a little more.

Cook over medium-low heat until the stew comes to a boil. Then take it off the heat and add the garlic, basil, and parsley. Serve sprinkled with the thinly sliced raw onion and the cilantro leaves. Have some beautiful, chunky, soft white bread for mopping up the gravy.

Tip *This is supposed to be spicy, but Georgian spicy is not that spicy at all, to be honest. So adjust the heat to your taste by roughly chopping the chiles instead of bruising them, adding seeds and all if you want it hotter, or make it mild if your family are not hotheads like you and just add some red pepper flakes to your own portion at the end. Just don't call it "ostriy" then. Call it "nezhniy" ("gentle" in Russian).*

