Russian Cuisine in Exile

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The Soul of Solyanka



If you were to ask an acquaintance "What is *solyanka*?" he would start to describe the meaty stew served in restaurants. Considering that the general decline of culture has spread even to émigrés, it is only rare representatives of the first wave who remember that there can also be fish and mushroom solyankas.[1] These are really the most delicious.

But almost no one manages to make even the more famous meat solyanka properly. The first golden rule is to spare no expense on the ingredients. Although you can make a delicious *ukha*[2] from small, leftover fish and a fine borscht from cheap meat, a solyanka is only as good as the quality of its constituent parts: boiled meat, ham, frankfurters, boiled tongue, sausages (never under any circumstance smoked or partially smoked).

Slice some salted (but not pickled) cucumbers and toss them in the pan with onion, tomato paste and herbs (parsley, dill, pepper, bay leaf). Add this mixture to your bouillon. After about 5 to 7 minutes, add your chopped meats. After another three minutes add olives (only pitted ones) and capers. Quickly remove the soup from the burner. Before serving, spritz with lemon juice. Serve with slices of lemon and sour cream.

But a solyanka will never bring joy if you forget that the main thing in any soup is the broth. The bouillon should be spicy and robust. This is the second rule that is often neglected, even by those in communion with the first.

The solyanka first appeared in Russia in the seventeenth century, when the number of fasting days in a year fluctuated between 192 and 216. You can imagine that the fish and mushroom varieties were made more often than meat solyanka.

For a fish solyanka, the essential ingredient is sturgeon. Without sturgeon, however delicious it may be, it is nothing more than fish soup.

Boil down a small fish with the proper soup spices and the "waste" of the sturgeon: cartilage, head, scales. Strain this bouillon and add the same vegetables and spices as for the meat solyanka. After about 5 to 7 minutes, throw the pieces of sturgeon fillet in—they will cook up in about 7 minutes, too. To bring a little nobility to your solyanka, you can cook your fillet along with a bit of salted salmon: Siberian, humpback, or lox.

For a mushroom solyanka, you need dried white mushrooms. In the States you can find Italian and Polish varieties. For 2 liters of liquid, 6 to 8 mushrooms is enough. In a pinch, you can make do with dried champignons, but you'll need more of them. Boil the mushrooms, cut them into strips, and boil them again with sliced carrots, parsley root, and celery. Take 1 pound of sauerkraut and 1 1/2 pounds of fresh cabbage and braise them with onion and tomato paste, covered, until the cabbage is soft. Add the finely chopped and salted (not pickled) mushrooms. Simmer together for about 15 minutes. Before removing the solyanka from the flame, add black olives, capers and lemon juice.

Alas, there are some masters of mushroom pickling in the émigré community, but almost no one makes salted mushrooms. Even so, you can at least make a mediocre mushroom solyanka. Even without salted mushrooms it's worth making this soup with its distinctive taste and aroma.

After all, the main value of Russian cuisine is its soups. It's no surprise that spoons appeared in *Rus'* some four hundred years before forks did.[3]

1 Although many Jews emigrated to the United States from the Russian empire starting in the 1880s, traditionally emigration from Russia in the twentieth century is divided into three "waves": those aristocrats and others fleeing the Bolsheviks after 1917, the displaced persons and other immigrants who arrived after World War II, and the "third wave" of émigrés in the 1970s and 1980s, primarily Jews permitted to leave for Israel (many of whom chose the United States, Canada, or Australia once they arrived in Europe), or intellectuals such as Solzhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky who were ejected from the Soviet Union by the Brezhnev government.

2 For more on ukha, see chapter 20.

3 *Rus'* is the historical name of the lands inhabited by Eastern Slavs.