

The Dacha Diaries: Rock Star Chicken Shashlik

Jennifer Eremeeva sends summer grilling off with a secret ingredient

By [Jennifer Eremeeva](#)

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Tangy and tender chicken shashlik, the Russian way. **Jennifer Eremeeva / MT**

August has flown by, and that's a good thing in Russia. Given the precarious state of geopolitics at present, the last thing we need is for the "August Curse" to strike.

Yes, that's a thing, and a uniquely Russian one at that: a phenomenon that grows more compelling with each fresh tragic or cataclysmic event that happens in Russia during the eighth month.

Opinion varies wildly as to the reason so many unfortunate events cluster in August, from the simple fact that it is unusually hot to far more esoteric notions of planetary alignment,

incomprehensible to the layman.

Whatever the reason, the evidence of the August Curse is overwhelming, from seismic military and political upheavals such as the declaration of World War I in 1917 or the hardliner coup d'état in 1991, to the tragic number of air and rail crashes that occur in August — to say nothing of the unfortunate Kursk submarine accident in 2000. Even Mother Nature seems to reserve her cruelest punches for August with extreme flooding, wildfires, and the notorious peat bog fogs.

Curse or coincidence, the optimal strategy is to hunker down somewhere and hope that the Dark Angel of August passes us by. And there is no better place to do that than the remote dacha of my friends Sveta and Ilya. The great thing about this place is the self-sufficiency of the neighborhood, where everyone produces, rears, or grows essential foodstuffs, making only very occasional trips to supermarket necessary.

Sveta spends most of the summer at the dacha and takes advantage of the long days of Russia's short but intense growing season by cultivating her kitchen garden with almost evangelical zeal.

A family of very silent farmers lives across the way and raises cows and goats that provide everything from fertilizer to sour cream. Another neighbor — a beady-eyed, red-faced guy of indeterminate age called Uncle Sergei seemed scary until I learned that he is a gifted home brewer and pickler, and what he doesn't know about infusing vodka, salting cucumbers, and making kvas isn't worth knowing.

And then there is Auntie Valya and her hens. Although she's only four feet tall and has lost most of her teeth, Auntie Valya is the kind of tough-cookie Russian woman who made Adolf Hitler cry. Her hens, which lay those double-yolk eggs I pay a fortune for at the market in town, are hands down the most spoiled animals in the neighborhood, and Auntie Valya is a lot nicer to them than she ever is to humans. They are all named for pop stars, which baffled me until I saw Auntie Valya's outhouse, which was wallpapered in old copies of "7 Days," a magazine that is part TV Guide, part tabloid gossip rag.

"That's Beyoncé," she told me as I helped her scatter scraps around the coop, "And that's Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, and Adele." The only rooster in the yard, who gets the day started for everyone around 3:30 a.m., is called Poroshenko.

Alas, this year the August Curse struck the chicken coop. Auntie Valya came tottering over to us one afternoon carrying a plate covered with a dishcloth. Tears coursed down her cheeks. This, it transpired, was Beyoncé who had stopped laying eggs and started hen-pecking poor old Poroshenko.

"Not Taylor Swift?" I murmured to Sveta.

When Beyoncé drew blood, Taylor Swift had also turned stroppy, forcing Auntie Valya to take steps. She chopped off Beyoncé's head and plucked her bare, but she could not bring herself to eat her best egg-layer, so she was offering Beyoncé to us.

It seemed only right to give Beyoncé a red-carpet send-off. We coaxed a bottle of kefir from

the silent farmers across the way and decanted some rasol — pickle juice — from a jar of one of Uncle Sergei's gherkins and let Beyoncé have a nice long soak in the mixture of the two.

This Slavic tweak of the worst-kept culinary secret of the American South turns out to be a great way to avoid the main pitfall of chicken shashlik: having to cook it for too long over the coals or on the bonfire until it is dry and tasteless. The kefir and salt and sugar in the rasol breaks down the proteins while also infusing it with the subtle flavors of dill, mustard seeds, and fennel fronds. Add a few spices and some garlic, and the result is a tender, tasty shashlik, that requires very little preparation and half the time on the grill!

Rock-Star Chicken Shashlik

Ingredients:

- 3 lbs. (1.5 kilos) chicken meat, cut into 4 cm chunks (chicken thighs are the most flavorful)
- 1 quart (1 liter) kefir or buttermilk
- 2 cups (475 ml) pickle juice or rasol (use a combination of vinegar and lemon juice if you don't have pickle juice)
- Salt and pepper
- 6 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tsp. red pepper flakes
- Olive oil

Instructions:

- Combine the buttermilk, rasol, chopped garlic, and red pepper with a generous pinch of salt and several grinds of the pepper mill.
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- Pour the mixture over the chicken into a non-reactive bowl or plastic zip-lock bag. Cover and let sit in the refrigerator for at least 2 hours. For best results, leave overnight.
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- Before serving, drain the chicken and pat it dry. Impale the chunks onto metal or wooden skewers. Brush very lightly with olive oil and season with salt and pepper.
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- Grill over coals or under the broiler for about 2-3 minutes per side, for a total of 8-9 minutes. Remove from the grill and serve immediately.

Jennifer Eremeeva is a longtime expat who writes about food, cuisine, history and travel. Follow her on Twitter @JWEremeeva.

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